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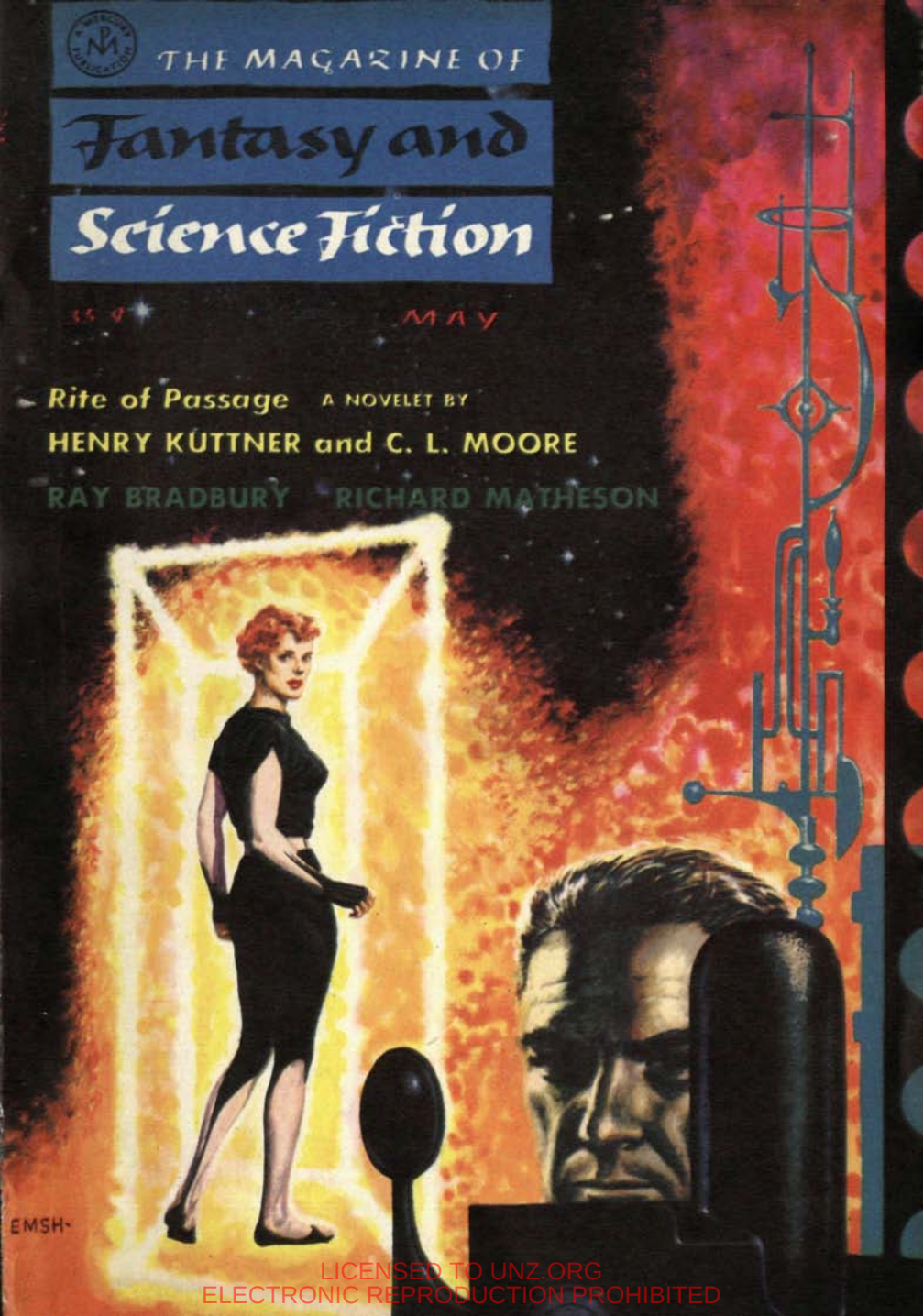
Fantasy and Science Fiction

35¢ MAY

Rite of Passage A NOVELET BY
HENRY KUTTNER and C. L. MOORE

RAY BRADBURY RICHARD MATHESON



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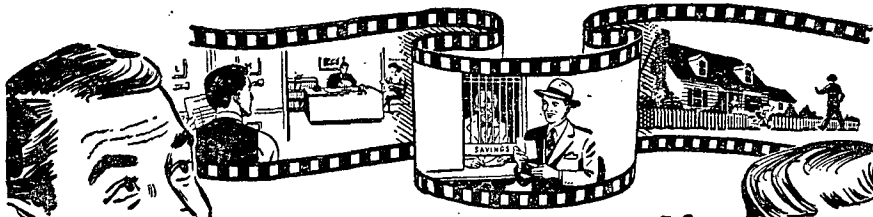

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 10, No. 5 MAY

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Henry Kuttner and Catherine Moore are, in their own words, "less a writing team than a case of literary multiple personality." They have written untold millions of words for magazines under 19 different pseudonyms; and well over a million of their words have appeared in book form (not counting anthologies) in 16 volumes from 9 different publishers and with 5 assorted by-lines. No scholar will ever straighten out their magazine history; but I've made an effort to clear up the confusion of their books with a complete checklist which appears at the end of this story. (Complete, that is, as of the end of January, 1956 — there'll probably be at least another volume by the time this appears in print.)

But the most important thing about the Kuttners is not how much they have written, but how astonishingly well. Few fabulously prolific writers have reached such peaks, or even such an average of literary achievement. And you'll find the customary Kuttner-Moore virtues of intelligence, suspense, subtlety and complex original thinking in this novelet of a society governed solely by superstition, and a rational man who sees his way clear to power and murder.

Rite of Passage

by HENRY KUTTNER AND C. L. MOORE

PHRATER STEPHEN RABB WAS PRETENDING not to be afraid. He sat there, sullen-faced and black-browed, trying to ignore the sacred things in my office, but he couldn't keep his eyes away from the Eagle Totem in its alcove above me. It made him shiver. It was supposed to. I pretended to be looking through the papers on my desk.

Finally he said, "You *are* Mr. Cole?"

"That's right," I said pleasantly, and waited.

"You're the Black President?"

"Of Communications Corporation, Eagle Totem," I said, and waited again, trying not to smile because I felt so good. I'd waited for Phrater Rabb a long time now. Not Rabb himself, but a man with his mission.

"I want . . ." He looked up at the totem. "You know what I want."

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"Yes," I said, patting the papers before me affectionately. I might have added, "And it's what I want too, Phrater Rabb. A lot more than you do, if you only knew it." But aloud I could only say, "It's all here in your application, Rabb. I know what you want. But you can't have it — not at the price you offer."

"Six years' service?" He sounded shocked. "That's not enough? You mean I put in six years living at bare subsistence, give the Corporation all that service practically for free, and it's not enough to get rid of Jake Haliaia?"

"Stealing a soul is an expensive business," I told him, looking solemn. "And service is only as good as the skill you've got. You're rated point five seven in your field. What is it — electrical engineering? According to my dope sheet, there's an oversupply right now. You'd have to go in hock for twenty years of subsistence living in service to the Corporation before we'd break even. If it's worth that much to you —"

Rabb said angrily, "I could kill him myself a lot cheaper!"

"You could, sure. But what then? One of his phraters would get the Black President of his clan to put a spell on you. It might be sickness or accident. We could cure that. But it might be soul-stealing. I think it would be. You ready to die that fast?"

Rabb pushed out his underlip sullenly and looked up at the Eagle in its little gold-lined alcove. He hesitated.

"What did Haliaia do to *you*, anyhow?" I asked, and then bit my tongue a little trying to take back that give-away accent, with its frank implication. I knew damn well what he had done to *me*. But he'd been safe. He knew I couldn't touch him. Black Presidents have to give up personal animosities when they take office. Or at least, they have to go through the motions.

"He swindled me out of an inheritance," Rabb said. "He's a cousin of mine." He hit his knee with a doubled fist. "Twenty years' service just to wipe out a man like that," he said. "It isn't fair."

"You could always go to court," I suggested, and we both laughed. It would take more like a hundred years of service to pay out the bribes that solution would cost. Law courts have nothing to do with justice any more. With no salaries involved, the officials live on bribes. It's a survival, like trial by combat, and it'll die out presently. Social control is based on corporate magic today, each corporation formed of people chosen according to aptitude, training and interest. Rabb had far more in common with me, his phrater in the Communications Corporation, than with his blood-relative Haliaia, that big, brown, handsome, half-Polynesian who thinks he can get away with — well, not murder, of course. But it's worse than that to steal a man's wife.

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Rabb was still sitting there considering.

"Twenty years is too long," he said. "I couldn't face it, not even to get back at Jake. Six years is my limit. What could you do to him for that?"

"Disease and injury," I said. "On the non-physical plane, I could make him very unhappy. But I can't guarantee anything, of course. It all depends on how strong the White President of his clan is. Everything's curable except soul-stealing — if the other guy's White President is good enough."

"I know your reputation, Mr. Cole," Rabb said. "You're just about the biggest in the business. I know you'll do your best. And it's worth six years to me."

"No more?"

He shook his head slowly.

"All right, Rabb," I said. "Sign here, then." I pushed a contract and a pen across the desk. "And here — that's for your insurance. Can't have you die on us before your term's up."

He scribbled his name twice. "That's all," I said.

"But will I —"

"You'll be notified, in detail. Eyewitness reports on Haliaia's progress will be mailed to you weekly. That's part of the service. Okay, Rabb? Good afternoon."

He went out awkwardly, shuffling sidewise not to turn his back on the Eagle, whose strong, sacred wings theoretically carry the Communications Corporation in flight around the world. I shuffled his papers together and poised them over the slot in my desk that would suck them down to Administration.

Under my breath I said, "The damned fool." But I couldn't quite let go of the papers. I couldn't quite decide. On the one hand, some richer enemy of Jake Haliaia's might turn up eventually. On the other, Rabb was a bird in the hand. I'd waited six months even for this. Haliaia was a man who made enemies right and left, sure. But soul-stealing is an expensive business. Unless Haliaia antagonized somebody so high in rating that the investment of only a few years' service would do the job, I'd be no better off — for waiting. Ideally, somebody else would turn up wanting what I wanted — Haliaia's death. Practically, it wasn't likely. I'd have to gimmick somebody's papers to get the man disposed of. Rabb's papers were as good as anybody's, for that purpose. But it's a risk. It's always a risk to tamper with corporate magic.

I'd gladly have paid Rabb's expenses out of my own pocket, if I'd dared. Did I dare? For months now I'd been telling myself that I risked nothing. I know how this so-called magic works. I know the truth. Magic can't affect a man if there's no such thing as magic. Or anyhow, not if he doesn't believe in it. My magic works, sure. But not because it's real.

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Still, forty years of training leaves its compulsions. A Black President who turns his powers to selfish ends has never been heard of. I'll bet it's been done, but not by anyone fool enough to get found out. At worst, I'd lose my job, which I spent fifteen years learning, and my prestige, which is always a good thing to have, and my pay, which is one of the highest in the Corporation. At worst, that is, from my enlightened viewpoint. From theirs, the worst is the soul-stealing spell, and I'd certainly get slapped with that. When they found it wouldn't work — what? A President, black or white, is immune to magic himself as long as his totem protects him — that is, as long as he doesn't break any major taboos, especially in public. But suppose I broke the biggest taboo, and it became known? My soul might be stolen. In that case, everyone would expect me to cooperate by dying.

When I didn't die at the appointed time, what then? Would there be a more realistic attempt to murder me, with a bullet or poison? I thought that would depend entirely on how superstitious my would-be executioners were. If they were skeptical enough, they'd certainly not depend on magic alone, after they saw it wasn't succeeding. But if they weren't skeptical, then they'd simply decide that my magic was stronger than theirs, and my prestige and power would rise higher than ever.

Was I the only President who wasn't blinded by superstitious belief in magic?

Well, there was one quick way to find out. I laid Rabb's papers on my desk and pushed the button that locked my office door. I didn't want any inquiring eyes to notice them before I made my mind up. I flipped the intercom switch and said to my secretary, "I'll be in Thornvald's office, Jan. Don't bother us unless it's urgent."

There is a private door in my office and in Thornvald's that opens on our connecting bridge. I always liked to cross over that way. Communications headquarters building covers two square miles. Above it our twin towers rise impressively, for I'm the nominal head of the Corporation, along with Karl Thornvald, the White President. Walking across the bridge, you can always hear the wind howling thinly through the steel structuring, and sometimes a surprised bird looks wildly at you from beyond the glass. I used to wonder how we'd handle the embarrassment if an eagle ever came by and knocked itself senseless against our bridge. Probably nobody'd ever notice. It's amazing how much a person can train himself to ignore if his beliefs are contravened.

Crossing the bridge is almost like flying. You're so high in the blue air, all the rooftops far below and spreading out enormously to the ring of green fields a mile away in

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every direction. For a moment it reminded me of the hallucination of flight that comes with the Eagle ritual.

Thornvald's telltale showed he was alone. I knocked and went in. His desk is like mine, with the Eagle Totem on the wall, but otherwise the office is bright and cheerful, without the black-magic props I have to have around.

Karl is a plump, round-faced man with an air of impressive solemnity he can put on at will. Right now he put it on automatically as the door opened, and then shrugged and gave me a mild grin.

"Hello, Lloyd," he said. "What's up?"

"Coffee break," I said. He shook his head over the papers in his hand, laid them down, shrugged again and pushed the coffee button. Two coffee bulbs rose instantly out of a desk panel.

"Good idea," he said, biting his open in that irritating, unsanitary way of his. "I've been sweating out a cure for a tough case. A key sonar man. The clan really needs him."

I opened my coffee with one hand and with the other reached for the paper he was handing me.

"Somebody in Food Corporation put a spell on him, eh?"

"Right. And you know Mumm. He's tricky, and getting trickier."

I knew him. Mumm is the new Black President of Foods, a young man and a very smart one, out to make a reputation for himself fast.

Thornvald said sadly, "I can't locate the real trouble. I thought it might be a foreign body, but the fluoroscope says no. And the man thinks he'll die."

"This says it's the Pneumonia Spell?"

"I think it is, but —"

"With pneumonia anybody'd feel lousy," I said. "Have you ever considered that what's wrong with your patient may not be magic, but germs?"

Thornvald blinked at me. "Well . . . now wait a minute, Lloyd. Of course it's germs. We know that, if it's the Pneumonia Spell. But who sends the germs? And who puts enough magic in them to eat up my patient's mana? I tell you, Mumm can make germs more virulent than any Black President I ever heard of. I've used five different blessings on the aureomycin, and I still can't cancel Mumm's magic."

"Maybe your patient's a skeptic," I said.

"Now, Lloyd," he said, pulling on his air of solemnity.

"Come off it, Karl," I said. "You know there are skeptics."

"Yes, I suppose so, poor souls. I'm happy to say I never met one. I've sometimes wondered how I'd handle it if I did."

I'd never met one either, barring myself, but I gave him a wise grin and said, "I know one. Smart man, too. Skeptics have their own power, Karl, some of them. Did you ever think one skeptic might be able to

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cure another, if your methods fail?"

He looked very shocked. His pink face actually went pale with it. "Be careful, Lloyd," he said. "That's getting close to blasphemy."

"I'm just stating facts," I said.

"If you know a skeptic, you know your duty." His voice was prim. "As for saving a patient at the expense of his soul, I'd rather have the man die in a state of grace, and so would you, Lloyd."

"Even a key man? Somebody the Corporation can't afford to lose?"

"Of course, Lloyd."

"Even if it means letting Mumm score a win, and our reputation going down?"

"Lloyd, I don't understand you in this mood." He looked up at the Eagle Totem and his lips moved slightly.

I sighed and got up, draining my coffee. "Forget it, Karl," I said. "I was just kidding."

"I certainly hope so," he told me stiffly. "I understand you, but others might get wrong ideas. If you really know a confessed skeptic, Lloyd, you'll have to report him. For his own good."

"I told you I was kidding. Sorry, Karl. I've been worrying, too."

"Trouble? Maybe I can help."

I looked at him. He really had gone pale at the thought of blasphemy. It had to be genuine. You can't put on an act like that. I drew a deep breath and plunged.

"No, not trouble exactly. I got a soul-stealing order today and it's going to be embarrassing for me, that's all."

He gave me one of his keen looks and then demonstrated in one word that he's really well qualified to be White President, however much I may underestimate the man sometimes.

"Haliaia?" he asked.

It scared me a little. He's almost too quick. But I couldn't back down now without losing a chance that might not come again for months.

"That's it," I said. "Haliaia."

He looked down at his hands, and then up again. His prim lips were firm.

"I know how you feel, Lloyd. There'll be talk. But you'll have to bear it. You know your duty. As long as you and I have the facts straight, what does it matter how people gossip?"

I gave him a stalwart, resolute look, Black President to White President, and the world well lost for duty's sake.

"You're right, Karl. Dead right."

"I know I am. Now stop worrying and put the papers through with a clear conscience, Lloyd. It isn't always easy, being a President."

I thought, "There's nothing easier, Karl," but aloud I said, "All right, if you say so, I'll do it. I'll put them through right now."

I went back across the bridge, feeling exhilarated and only a little scared. I made the necessary changes in Rabb's request. Then I held Jake

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Haliaia over the slot and let go, and watched him go fluttering down the dark vacuum into infinity.

Afterward I turned and looked up at the Eagle Totem. It's just a stuffed bird. That's all.

Now there was no use in even trying to keep the secret. I sat down and put in a call to Florida. After a little while the wings of the stuffed eagle carried Communications Corporation's message across the continent and a woman's face appeared on the screen. She was looking lovelier than I had ever seen her look before. Her eyes were a little out of focus; obviously I wasn't registering yet on her screen. Or in her life, either, if you wanted to think about it that way.

A mechanical voice said, "Mr. Cole? We have Miami now. Mrs. Cole is on the screen."

Now the violet eyes focused. We looked at each other across many miles and enormous emotional distances that would never be bridged again.

"Hello, Lila," I said.

"What do you want?"

"Two things. First, congratulations. The divorce is final this week, isn't it?"

She simply waited.

I smiled at her. "Oh, yes," I said. "The other thing. Haliaia is going to die."

The ritual hallucination was the next step. It's meaningless, of course —a drug-induced dream which habit has shaped to an expected pattern. Thornvald goes through the same ritual for white magic, and he really believes the Eagle appears and talks to him. I'm not that gullible, but I follow the routine too. When I don't, it worries me, maybe because I feel if I vary in one thing I may get careless and vary in more public, and dangerous, ways.

This time I thought I'd skip the ritual. It hadn't even the validity of faith, now I'd broken the main taboo of my office. But I found I couldn't concentrate on my work. Habit, after all, was too strong for me. I made mistakes, punched the wrong buttons, got so irritated finally that I gave up and went ahead with the routine mumbo-jumbo. I entered the ritual room with an odd sense of relief. I burned the necessary herbs, gave myself a shot of the holy drug and said the usual prayer to the Eagle. After that it was the same hallucination I've had so often.

I dreamed. The Eagle flew with me to Miami. I found Haliaia in a casino playing chuck-a-luck. He was big and brown and handsome. I knew he was due to get enormously fat in later life, like most Polynesians. Lila would be spared this, and Jake. But they wouldn't thank me for it.

I stunned him with my sacred spear and dragged him to a dark place. With the spear I made a circle on his forehead. Then I drove

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the spear through his chest and dropped three drops of his heart's blood on the Eagle Totem which I carried. I touched him with the Eagle and the wound closed. I whirled the totem around his head. He opened his eyes and saw me.

I said to him, "You will live two weeks. For a day you will be well. Then you will be sick. On the fourteenth day you will die. The Eagle Totem will eat up your soul."

Then the dream ended.

What really happened was completely practical. Haliaia's sheaf of papers, sucked down into Administration, passed across various desks, were stamped, sorted, assigned, and then sat waiting my go-ahead. My assistants handle most of the black magic, but for a soul-stealing the Black President himself usually performs the honors.

So I sent down for the folder on Haliaia, made up some months ago by our spies in Haliaia's Corporation. He was a key man in the Food Company, and we try to keep folders on such people handy, just in case. I had to know just the right moment when the launching of a spell against the man would hit him where he lived.

Ordinary magic is easy to handle, run of the mill stuff like bad luck, illness, accidents. You can handle it on the spiritual level as a rule, but you don't depend on that. Often you give a man a little push. You arrange to get him infected with a virus, say. You have spies in the restaurant where he eats to drop something mildly toxic in his soup. But you want to make sure he knows it. To make sure antibiotics won't lick the virus, you put a very public spell on the virus. Somehow, if the victim knows what you've done, the magic usually works. He's scared, and fear helps the bugs work. And of course if the bugs don't work, if antibiotics or something cure the victim, then everybody believes the black magic has been cured by white magic — the job of the White President of every clan.

But you have to study your victim carefully, his life charts and psychological patterns and the reports from trained observers working quietly in the enemy's office or his home. (I don't doubt that observers usually had an eye on me, making notes for the files of other Black Presidents. You just can't do anything about that situation. Our whole social pattern is based on it.)

So you study your victim's charts. You pick exactly the right time to publicize your spell against him. It's always a time when the man's already down — in an emotional depression, or sick with some mild infection, or under stress of some kind. Then you reinforce the stress, make sure he knows he's under a spell and that all his associates know it, and he's apt to cooperate even against his will.

But the really big magic, the soul-stealing — that has to be handled

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more carefully. Plenty of deaths have been diagnosed as soul-stealing when they're really a burst appendix or thrombosis, or something medicine can't help. The White President of the dead man's clan can't admit his magic's too weak to save the victim. So he takes the obvious out of claiming an enemy used the soul-stealing spell against him. For that there is no cure.

Actually, few Black Presidents do it. Few people can pay for it. But simply because most deaths are diagnosed as the result of soul-stealing, people believe that if their souls are stolen, they'll inevitably die. It's affirming the consequent, of course, which isn't logically valid, but it works. You say, "If a man dies, his soul must have been stolen," so naturally, if his soul is stolen, he's got to die. There's nothing to magic but that.

So I went over Haliaia's charts very closely. I wanted to make sure. Everybody has cycles of worry and depression. Pick your moment and it often takes only one push to send a man over the edge. You play on his buried stresses, his hidden fears. I spent fifteen years learning how these things are done. I chose the moment carefully. . . .

An emergency newscast broke into all the programs. Everything went off the air except the announcement that the soul of Jakob Haliaia of Food Corporations had been stolen. And that meant he was already half dead.

I liked to think about his reactions. He'd been worried a long time about what I'd do. No matter how confident he thought he felt, I *was* a Black President. He was worried, all right. And his charts showed that he was highly suggestible. I didn't need to wait for a physical illness or accident, or even to induce one. I simply set my date, and struck.

After that I closed my office and went away on a short vacation. In a sense it was cowardly and would look bad. Mumm, the young Black President of Haliaia's Corporation, would think I was afraid of him. Certainly he'd strike back if he could. That didn't worry me much, though it would be interesting to see what he'd do.

No, I had two reasons for going. The important one was that I meant to watch Jake Haliaia die. I wanted to spend two wonderful weeks as near him as I could get, seeing the spell take hold, seeing society draw away from him, seeing him move through a vacuum that gradually thickened into the murk of oblivion as the day of his death drew on. That would be worth any cost I might have to pay later for breaking the strongest taboo a Black President can face.

The unimportant reason was Phrater Rabb. He was the weak link in my chain, of course. There wasn't much I could do to cover my tracks. The plain fact was that I'd falsified his papers, given away fourteen years of the Corporation's

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money and violated my own sacred vows in striking down a personal enemy for private revenge. But what covering-up I could do, I did.

Specifically, I wrote Rabb a letter stating that the Black President had been called away on an extended trip before Rabb's application for soul-stealing could be confirmed. Therefore, in my absence, my assistant was putting the application through. Would Rabb kindly notify them if there was any error in this case? If not, Jakob Haliaia's soul-stealing would go into operation on schedule, and Rabb would be kept posted by eyewitness reports on the progress of his revenge.

I knew damned well Rabb wouldn't notify the Company that there'd been a mistake. For I'd studied Rabb's life charts and personality patterns very thoroughly before I'd decided to move. It was perfectly true that Rabb had been swindled out of an inheritance, but that's a commonplace event today. What was unusual was the man's reaction. He wanted revenge, because he'd been hit in his most vulnerable area. It was all laid out clearly in his charts: *dominant trait: dysfunctional acquisitiveness.* In our terminology, what that meant was that Rabb would be so delighted to get something for nothing that he'd keep his mouth shut. A man behaves as he's conditioned to behave, and this was Rabb's way. He wouldn't talk.

So I couldn't fail.

Florida's Food Corporation glitters from the air. The solar water vats make the roofs a dazzle of light, and the city stretches out into the Gulf on islands and floating platforms. Moving ways studded with cars cross the water and canals give back blue light and color through what seems to be dry land.

I took a taxi into the Corporation. I wasn't making the slightest effort at concealment. Both Mumm and Haliaia must know quite well who issued the spell that cut Haliaia off from the world. If Mumm found out I was here it would show him I wasn't afraid. If anyone asked me, it was quite natural that I should be here. A Black President is helpless to defend himself against a personal enemy, but there isn't a rule in the book that forbids him to enjoy the spectacle of an enemy destroyed at someone else's orders.

I left my taxi at the door of Haliaia's office building and went up to the floor that wasn't his any more. I didn't go into the office. It wasn't necessary. I just sat on a windowsill, lit a cigarette, and looked for about ten minutes at the door that didn't carry Jake Haliaia's name any more. I thought about how it must have happened.

Where was he when the news broke? How had he first heard it? Was he watching the TV screen when his own broad brown face came on, and the voice intoning his death? Was he with Lila when he heard? And did she draw away from

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him, like everyone else, frightened and awestruck, knowing Haliaia was a dead man from that moment on?

It's a highly ritualized pattern, the ostracism of the living dead. The man's social personality is removed. The victim is completely isolated. The social fabric pulls away from the condemned man and from that moment he ceases to exist in the world of the living.

He must have hurried to his office — this building, this door — to call on his confederates in Food Corporation for help. Somehow at first, a man never believes this can possibly be happening to him. He always expects his friends can help. . . .

When he got here, this was what he saw: Another man's name on his office door. Another man's face behind his desk. Eyes that turned away from his, nervous and embarrassed, fearful of contagion.

That's the first movement. Society assumes the man is dead. He may still be walking and talking and making hysterical demands, but everyone knows he is no longer a living being.

In the second movement society surges back over the victim like a returning wave, but it comes with a purpose. The man is dead — living, but not living — and he must now be removed, put into the spirit world of his totem, where he now belongs. He is sacred but dangerous. So the movement of society's return is the mourning rite. It is the funeral, which guides the victim into the spirit world. He attends his own funeral, in the place of honor, the bier. And by that time he cooperates fully. I've never seen it fail. The enormous compulsive force of the ritual is too strong to fight. The victim believes, and dies. At the end, his personality can be seen altering before your eyes. Sometimes they begin to act like their totem. Always they die — because they believe.

I took another taxi to Haliaia's home. It was a luxury place, big curved walls of translucent plastic ribbed with veins of its own fabric. Had he brought Lila here? She wouldn't be here now. The walls and windows were darkened, and hanging on the door was a big black wreath. I saw some dishes of food standing by the door in black containers. There would be nobody at all in the house now, except Haliaia.

I crossed the street and waited in the shadow of a doorway. After a long time I saw the black wreath of the big house shiver slightly, and the door opened quite slowly. Haliaia looked out.

He was still big, but he looked shrunken. He was still brown, but very pale under the brown. He looked all around, without seeing me, and then down at the funeral dishes. He was wearing the sacred garment of his clan, green, with his Fish Totem on the breast. All of his other clothing had, of course, been sold or given away by now. At his funeral the robe he wore

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would be changed for the shroud, white, with his totem on it.

Oh, yes, Haliaia believed. He had allowed the sacred garment to be put on him, and he was still wearing it. He wasn't fighting against the spell. The obsession was too strong for him.

I felt an odd little rush of relief when I saw that. Recognizing it, I knew suddenly why I had really come to Florida. I no longer believed in my own magic, or anyone else's. Not believing, I didn't feel entirely sure that anyone else did either. Especially Jake Haliaia. He too might have become a skeptic, though he never could have got access to the forgotten and forbidden microfilms which gave me my new knowledge.

So that was why I had come. I had to see with my own eyes that Haliaia still believed. No, he'd never have got to the microfilms, but I thought he knew what was in them as surely as if he himself had seen them spin up the glowing glass screen like time winding up. For Lila knew, and Lila would have told him.

Because I'd told Lila.

I'd told her the truth. I'd told her that no magic really existed, and what was really happening, and why it had happened this way. And then, free of the fear of magic, she had done what she'd always wanted to do — she'd left me and gone to Haliaia. There's no law against that. There isn't even a taboo, which is stronger than any law. Only it was almost unprecedented, because, somehow, no one divorces a President — a magician. No one who believes in magic.

And I was the one who'd swept the shadows of superstition from Lila's mind and let her see the truth.

I'd done that — I could reverse the process. I could make Lila a believer in magic again. In fact, I had to. For I'd told her too much, and that made her dangerous, if she talked enough, long enough, to enough people. Rumor spreads. If it became commonly known that I, Black President of the Eagle Clan, didn't believe in corporate magic, where would I be?

Probably dead.

All right. She'd never loved me, though I'd thought she had. She'd married me against her will, partly because of her family, partly because she was afraid to refuse a Black President's offer. But she loved Haliaia.

When she saw her lover die — by magic — the powerful, unconscious forces in her mind, the enormous invisible pressure of society would force her back into the darkness of superstition from which I'd brought her. Against her will, she would succumb, since reason cannot fight against emotion when the stress is powerful enough. If I'd used magic against Lila herself, I think I would have failed. But Haliaia was her vulnerable point, and I struck at him, and now he was already follow-

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ing the compulsive ritual which would end in the Rite of Passage and his death.

Oh yes — Lila would believe in magic again. And then I'd get her back. . . .

A man came down the street slowly, lounging on the rail of the moving way. Haliaia shouted, "Ed! Ed!" and waved frantically. As his head turned I saw the red ring stamped on the brownness of his forehead — the mark of my sacred spear in the hallucination. The clan undertakers stamp that indelible ring at the same time they change the victim's clothing.

The man on the moving way twitched a little when he heard the call, but he did not turn. I saw Haliaia surge forward, as if he meant to run out and force an answer from the man. He almost ran — almost. I saw his foot reach out for the next step. But something stopped him. He hesitated, drew back, opened his mouth to call again, but he made no sound at all.

I looked away down the length of the street. Far off on the Gulf I could see the fishing fleet, copter-guided, driving the shoals of food into the nets. A queer thought struck me. Long ago, in primitive groups, the totem animal had been taboo, or so my research in the microfilm libraries had told me. But today we eat our totems. Perhaps all life today is a ritual condition, not just the totem itself but all life. . . .

I realized I was avoiding looking at Haliaia. I made myself look back. He wasn't there any longer, and the black dishes of food had disappeared.

There would be about a ten-day interval now before Haliaia died. I meant to be there to watch. In the meantime I enjoyed a vacation, the first I'd had in nearly five years. Partly I felt I needed it, and partly I wanted to keep out of everybody's way until Haliaia was irrevocably dead. I had an uneasy feeling that Black President Mumm was looking for me. There wasn't a thing he could do, but I would have been just as happy to avoid him entirely until the thing was over.

One of the things I did was revisit the microfilm library where I had first learned the truth about magic and the past. Never mind where it is. Never mind how I found out about it. I showed my pass at the door, went down to the lowest level of all, and found in the dark corner the same dusty door which nobody had passed since I found it last. I thought I must be the only man alive who had ever stumbled across it. It isn't strange — the library is a very hard one to get entry to at all, and these levels of the stacks are forbidden to all but a few of the very highest officials in the Corporations.

I filled my pockets with ancient rolls of film and went calmly up to a scanner booth and shut the door behind me. And for the next hour I took a heady plunge into the

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quaint, terrible old days of the Twentieth Century.

Some of the films were books on social psychology, anthropology, medicine. Some of them were old newspapers of the 1980s. Unsteadily under the slanting, greenish glass of the screen the print and the pictures swam as I turned the controls that unreeled them and brought them into focus. It was eerie, reading the columns of forgotten news that men first read during the terrible wars of the Twentieth Century. Everything about their way of life seems so incredible, now.

They had national boundaries then, instead of corporations. The wars between totalitarian states and monopolistic corporations hadn't yet been fought out to a synthesis which resulted in today's gigantic companies that keep society alive. Much of their way of life seems unbelievable now, but some of it makes very good sense.

Belief in magic, then, was something for the primitives of the world. I looked it up in the anthropology books. In a way, it all seems very plausible. You can see how magic regained control.

In the earlier days, you believed in magic only if you had no control over your environment. Naturally, you didn't need magic if you could control your life without it. But the uncivilized peoples, at the mercy of nature, had to use magic because it was their only refuge from despair. And along with them, groups in civilized society who still had to fight with the unpredictable also believed. Fishermen, for instance, in conflict with the sea, believed in luck and charms. Hunters, sportsmen, actors all believed. Everyone at the whim of nature or society clung to superstitions in a frantic effort to believe they could control by luck or magic what they could not control by their greatest skill.

So when society broke down, after the Great Wars, mankind quite naturally reverted to magic. And the organized, vested interests in magic kept control when society climbed back up the steep slopes down which it had skidded at the end of the Wars. Some sciences were allowed to progress. Not all. Nothing that might weaken faith in magic is practiced by the Corporations of today.

It's amazing how much you can believe if you're brought up in the conviction that magic really works. Even I had believed, in a sort of split-minded way, in a lot of things I actually knew weren't true. I had learned the rigamarole. I performed the rituals. People sickened or died when I leveled my spells at them. Sometimes people sickened whom I'd never heard of, and I accepted the magical responsibility, knowing I lied about those, wondering if I lied even to myself about others. But I acted as if it were all true, and after a while I really began believing I'd worked the magic I claimed, just as everyone else believed.

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But always a part of my mind must have rebelled. So it was a wonderful feeling to learn the truth. I wasn't really mad, or blasphemous, to doubt my own powers. I could give up the long inward struggle, trying to force myself to believe impossible things. I felt a relief so tremendous it made me a little light-headed, the first time I ran these microfilms under the greenish glass and read the things my mind had always known were true.

After that I was free. Or as free as society would allow. The tremendous power of public belief still restricted me externally, but in my own mind I could think as I chose. I could behave as I chose, so long as I stayed careful. I could send out a spell that would strike Jake Haliaia down in his tracks, and nobody could stop me, because the truth had set me free. . . .

But it was no good to be free alone.

I looked at the columns of forgotten news on the screen before me, and wished that I had lived then instead of now, in a world and time that seemed far more real to me than my own. I had been born into a world of wrongness, a time that was out of joint. I was a skeptic, the one-eyed man in the country of the blind. It was as if I alone could see a great leaning crag far overhead, swaying, ready to topple and crush us all, while all around me the blind men made their futile magic and never knew the real danger.

I didn't know either, really. There was nothing as tangible as a toppling cliff. But I, the one-eyed man, had always seen a shadow, sensed an insecurity, felt a dim and hovering terror. I had never found out what it was. Not the Eagle — the totem was only a superstition. Magic? There was none. But somehow, somewhere, something existed that cast its shadow of fear, a monster I had been trying to identify all my life. And perhaps that was really why I first began to search the forbidden microfilms. Perhaps I had thought that in the past I could find the monster's genesis, and learn its name.

I never had. I had learned truth, and skepticism, and I had come to understand why corporate magic was the basis of my own culture. Back in the Twentieth Century, the troubles — stresses — dangers had grown until they merged into one great terror — a death-fear — which left no room in life for anything else. There had been real dangers, certainly. Society could have destroyed itself. And it nearly did. Then the death-fear grew too great, and reality could not be faced any more. Men were afraid of men. Society, somehow, had to be protected against itself, and so magic became the safeguard. Or, rather, a belief in magic, indoctrinated early, self-perpetuating, until now society felt safe — under some unnamed monster's terrifying shadow.

What monster?

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I didn't know. But I was alone, in the country of the blind, and I think that was why I had to open Lila's superstition-blinded eyes. So I wouldn't be alone any more. And I'd done it, and I'd lost her.

And in the end I'd get her back — blind again. She'd come back to me, after Haliaia died and the great forces of ritual had driven her into blindness, no matter how much her reason might fight against it. She was already learning that, even though magic was a lie, *I* was very far from powerless.

She would come back blind. If that was the only way I could get her back — and it was — then let her eyes be sealed again.

I sat there, staring at the glowing screen that opened into time. I sat there for a long while, thinking about Lila.

On the fourteenth day I went to watch Haliaia die.

I was just leaving my hotel room for his home when the bell rang and the face I had been expecting for two weeks flashed into sight on the visiphone screen. My hand, outstretched for the doorknob, began to shake. My heart pumped. I felt like a schoolboy caught in some act of guilt. My first impulse was to run. But then I pulled myself together and remembered who I was, and how well I was covered. I turned back to the screen and pushed the button that would bring me into focus for Mumm of Food Corporation.

He had a sharp young face, not too scrupulous, and that frightening brashness that comes from the confidence of youth, before it has ever known a major defeat. I remembered him dimly from our school days, he just entering the university as candidate for training when I was graduating. His eyes came into quick focus on mine as my face shaped on his screen.

"Hello," he said. "Mumm. I remember you from school, don't I, Cole?"

"Yes, I know you," I said. "How are you, Mumm?" And I touched three fingers to the corner of the screen in the same moment he extended his to the same spot, which is as close as you can come to a handshake on television.

"I heard you were in town," he said rather cagily.

"I'll bet," I murmured. "What can I do for you?"

He eyed me sharply and closely. "We're losing a good man today," he said.

I didn't pretend not to understand. "You can't expect me to be sorry," I said.

"I know." He paused. "Quite a coincidence," he said, his eyes searching my face. "Convenient for you," he added.

I let my voice sharpen. "Maybe the rules have changed since I left the university. Used to be out of line to ask what you're asking."

"I'm not asking any questions," he told me. "I don't need to. All

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I'm saying is it's very convenient for you, having Haliaia die so soon after your . . . falling-out. Coincidence, your turning up for the funeral. You a relative, Cole?"

I paused long enough to be sure my voice wouldn't shake. I was repressing a strong impulse to smash the screen in his face.

"Not precisely a relative," I told him when my voice was under control. "I wanted to watch him die. Does that surprise you?"

"I know it was you," he said flatly. "I'm not asking. I know. What I wonder is whether you had a valid client, or if you acted for yourself."

"I could bring you up before the university for that," I said.

"You won't."

"I may. I'll talk it over with Thornvald. If you have any doubts about my ethics, you'd better take it up with him, not me. Do you think I'd show up here if I knew I'd blasphemed?"

He grimaced very slightly. "You might. If you stole Haliaia's soul for the reason I think you did, you wouldn't stop at anything. I'll talk with Thornvald."

"Then do it, and stop annoying me." I drew a deep breath. "You talk like a skeptic when you break your vows this way. I'll have a word with your White President after the funeral, Mumm. You and I haven't got a thing to say to each other." I flipped the switch and cut him off in the middle of whatever he was about to say next. His mouthing face, gone silent, shrank to a bright pinpoint and vanished.

Shaking a little, I whirled around, snatched up my funeral robe and hurried out. It didn't matter a damn what Mumm believed, because I was covered. Even if he moved illegally against me, I wasn't afraid of his magic. But if he talked to Thornvald . . .

Suddenly I saw what a fool I'd been. I would have to get rid of Rabb. I couldn't see how I could possibly have overlooked something so obvious so long. With Rabb's mouth shut, the only possible evidence against me would be gone. I couldn't afford to take any further chances. Thinking over what viruses I had on hand in the lab, I hurried into a taxi and gave Haliaia's address.

The house was crowded. For the first time since the spell against Haliaia was announced, his friends and relatives returned. Society flowed back over the living dead man to celebrate his funeral and the receiving of his soul by the totem of his clan. Voices were singing the second funeral hymn as my taxi drew up. I pulled the funeral robe on over my street clothing and joined the crowds moving through the house. Nobody here was likely to know me, and I didn't care if they did.

I followed the mourners up the escalator to Haliaia's bedroom, where he lay on the black-draped bed. The Fish Totem had been set up where

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he could see it. His half-closed eyes blinked slowly, gazing at the stuffed fish on its gold board as if he saw the vision of eternity before him. Maybe he did. Belief can do strange things even to the intelligent mind.

Against the wall were his relatives in the clan, and his closest friends, kneeling on little pneumatic pads and singing the death song. I didn't see Lila, but two of Haliaia's wives were present. I hadn't realized he had gone through marriage and divorce that often. I wondered how Lila liked being third.

Around the bed, back and forth, hands folded over a little green plastic fish figure, walked a man I knew must be Haliaia's father, his closest living relative. He sang in a deep soft voice.

On the bed Haliaia lay wrapped in the white shroud with the Fish Totem. His half-shut eyes were dull. I thought he saw nothing but the stuffed figure above the bed. His mouth gaped and closed. His arms were pressed close to his sides. He lay like the totem of his clan, straight and rigid on the bed.

Suddenly his whole body twisted in a convulsive arc, and then wrenched itself back. Three times he did this, and lay motionless again.

The song rose solemnly.

A fourth time Haliaia twisted himself back and forth. He was imitating his totem. He lay still. But his feet moved a little, slowly, as if they moved through water. . . .

The bad luck began two months late. There was nothing magical about it. Just one of those things — everybody has runs of bad luck.

I kept a very close watch on Mumm and on my own safety. And on my own White President, just in case Mumm proffered charges against me. Nothing happened there. Thornvald's behavior was perfectly normal. I tried to put myself in Mumm's place and see what he would do. I couldn't figure it. What could he do? He might not be able to resist sending out a stray virus or two, just in the hope of a hit. I watched myself very carefully for that. He might even hire a thug to shoot me or arrange an accident. I watched for that, too, as much as any man can. You have to take your chances in this world, and you don't get something for nothing. I had got Haliaia's death, and it was worth the risk.

Once I called Lila. She wouldn't talk to me. I let it slide. Time enough later to try again. In the meantime I got a girl with the theatrical name of Flamme to live with me. I didn't intend to marry again for a while, and I needed someone to keep my establishment operating. It has to be done on a big scale, and I need a wife for social purposes. Flamme was of the hetera class, which meant she could act as wife in everything except the spiritual link, which is part of the magical system. Like our ancestors, we have serial polygamy, so after a

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divorce I could marry again, but on the spiritual level the polygamy is cumulative. There can be no spiritual divorce. So in the magical world I was still married to Lila. And she wouldn't talk to me — yet.

Rabb, incidentally, had an accident about a week after Haliaia's death, and unfortunately, in the hospital, he got an overdose of sedation and died. The clan gave him a very respectable funeral.

Otherwise nothing unusual happened, at first — except for one irrational, nonsensical thing that I'd never anticipated. Everything conscious, everything controllable and rational, I knew I could handle. But what began to go wrong was the ritual dream.

I told you how it works. Herbs are burnt, there's the shot of so-called holy drug, ritual prayer, hallucination. The average magician's belief in himself is reinforced by the hallucination. Even after I lost the belief I went on with the window-dressing ritual, because I felt that if I began to vary from the conventional routine even in small matters, I might get careless and vary too much, in ways that would be noticeable.

So I went on as usual. People came to me to get spells put on their enemies in other clans, and I got their signatures on the necessary contracts and publicized the magic in the communication channels. I had no trouble until another case of soul-stealing came up.

The man was a Communications executive and his enemy was in Entertainment, the Lion Totem. My man's skill was rated high enough so he had to sign up for only nine years of service on minimum subsistence. I got his signature, sent him away, and burned the herbs. I gave myself an injection and said the Eagle Totem prayer.

The hallucination began.

I found the victim in my dream and was just about to stun him with the sacred spear when — I woke up.

I was back in my office, with the herbs smoking in their burner and my arm still tingling from the hypodermic spray. It was the first time since I'd been an acolyte this had ever happened. I sat there, wondering. Wondering and worrying.

It was idiotic, but what kept running through my head was the thought that unless I had the ritual hallucination, I couldn't visit the taboo microfilm library any more. There was no logical connection at all. And yet I couldn't get the idea out of my mind. The more I thought about it the more worried I felt, without any reason at all.

At last I realized that the drug must have been weak, or the herbs — well, not the herbs, they're part of the window-dressing. All the same, I sent them down for chemical analysis, along with the drug. I sat waiting for the results. Once, I remember, I glanced back over my shoulder at the stuffed eagle on the wall. He gave me a glassy look.

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The report said the drug and the herbs were the same as usual.

Not that it mattered. I could start the soul-stealing telecast at any time, and the magic would work whether or not I had the hallucination, since the magic was in the mind of the victim, not in my mumbo-jumbo. But I didn't like this. It was a symptom, and I needed to understand its meaning.

Finally I decided I'd gradually build up immunity to the drug, and what I needed was a stronger dose. Well, I was right, up to a point. When I doubled the dose I got further into the hallucination. But I still woke up before I'd completed the ritual dream. This time I woke with a sense of near-panic, a feeling that something had gone very wrong indeed, and the knowledge that I had to do something about it fast.

What I did was dangerous, but I wasn't thinking clearly, and little waves of anxiety kept starting around my stomach and spreading out until — well, I tried again, with a still stronger dose, and I finished the hallucination. But I woke up with two doctors working on me, and Thornvald hovering behind them adjusting his silly totem symbols.

"Get the hell out of here, Karl," I said. "This is medical, not magical. I just got an overdose of the holy drug."

"Now, Lloyd," Thornvald said, trying to look impressive. "The medics are taking care of their business. Just let me take care of mine."

"Well, it isn't around here," I said, and fell back, gasping, my heart fluttering till I was afraid it would stop altogether. One of the doctors gave me a shot of something and told me to relax. Remembering Rabb, I was really scared as I drifted off in spite of myself into sleep. But I woke feeling better. Thornvald had gone, leaving word that while he hadn't finished his diagnosis, no magic seemed involved.

I still felt terrible, but I went back to my desk and finished the job, purely routine now, luckily. Then I went home, canceling my other appointments, and told Flamme to keep the house quiet.

The next day I still felt terrible. Flamme wanted me to stay home, but once a man gets sick it's assumed there's magic at work, and I couldn't afford to have people start wondering why a Black President should feel bad. So I started for the office, with a splitting headache and a slight temperature.

Only I didn't get there. As I stepped onto a moving way I felt dizzy and misjudged the distance when I reached for the back of a lounge chair. I fell flat. If I hadn't tried to catch myself it would have been all right. But I threw out my arms and landed at just the proper angle to break my left thumb.

That did it. The medics X-rayed and tested, and finally put my left hand in a cast that left the fingers

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free, but was a damned nuisance. It would take more than a month to heal, too. In a quiet rage I went home, got into bed and yelled at Flamme to bring me liquor. Finally I collapsed into happy forgetfulness, drunk as hell. So drunk I even forgot to take alcohol-neutralizing pills before I went to sleep.

So I woke up with a cold as well as a hangover.

The cold went into influenza almost immediately.

I remember medics working on me, and Flamme hovering in the background, and Thornvald, Thornvald, Thornvald eternally coming to bother me. Thornvald with his silly gadgets supposed to diagnose magic. Thornvald saying, "I'll do my best, Lloyd. You know that. I'll cure the spell if I possibly can. . . ."

And then suddenly silence, and waking with the fever gone and nothing to remind me of my sickness but the cast on my hand, and weakness. Silence.

I rang the bell, and no one came. The room seemed very dim. The windows had been partially opened. I lay there wondering.

I wondered if I were strong enough to get up. Apparently I'd have to. Angrily I threw back the covers and found I was pretty strong after all. I was shaping a few choice phrases in my mind about firing half a dozen servants and maybe Flamme too, when I swung my feet out of bed and saw the blue tunic stretched across my knees. I didn't have any blue nightwear. Blue is a sacred color. I looked down at my chest . . .

Everything came to a dead stop.

I was wearing the sacred blue tunic with the Eagle Totem, wings outspread, embroidered across the front. My hand without any direction from my mind flew up to touch my forehead. It was as if I could feel the red circle traced there by somebody's ritual spear in a hallucinatory dream. Somebody's — whose? Whose?

"Flamme!" I shouted.

No answer anywhere.

I jumped out of bed. I didn't feel weak at all. I ran out of the room and down the silently gliding escalator, feeling the blue tunic catch between my knees. I kept calling for Flamme and the servants. All I heard were echoes. I jerked open the front door and there on the threshold were the black dishes of food. A black wreath swung against the door panel.

I ripped it down. I saw people passing in the street and I shouted to them. No one looked at me. Not a head turned.

I realized what I was wearing, and very quickly stepped back and shut the door. There was a mirror in the front entry. I stepped over and looked at myself. The red ring on my forehead was fluorescent in the dim light. I scrubbed at it with both hands. I whirled and ran through the house to the nearest lavatory, and with soap and nail-

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brush I rubbed at the dye until my skin was almost as red as the ring. But nothing would take it off. I knew nothing would even cover it. That fluorescence shines through the heaviest makeup, and no known substance will remove it.

At least I could take off the tunic. Awkwardly, because of the cast on my hand, I pulled it over my head and left it in a heap on the tiled floor. Naked, I searched the house.

It was empty. Everything personal was gone. No clothing anywhere. My special cigarettes were gone. My books. My writing paper with my name on it was gone, and blank black-bordered sheets had replaced it. Every closet, every drawer, every shelf was empty.

Walking around naked, feeling like a ghost, I tried the visiphone. It was dead. The TV entertainment channels were dead too. The house resounded with silence and the feel of death.

I had to get out. So I had to have clothing. I tried a sheet, toga-fashion. It looked idiotic. But I wasn't going to wear the Eagle Totem tunic again. Not in public. Not even in private.

There was no money in the house.

Wrapped in the sheet, I went out. Nobody looked at me. The red ring on my forehead told everyone all they needed to know. No taxis would stop for me, so I had to take the moving way. At the first clothing store I stepped off and walked in, took what I wanted off the racks and shelves. No one interfered. I dressed in a booth and went back to the moving way, feeling a little better, but madder than I'd ever been in my life.

I went directly to my office. The secretaries ignored me, even when I spoke to them. I didn't waste time. I pushed past them and opened the door of my office.

Another man sat behind my desk. Above him on the wall the Eagle Totem looked down with its glassy stare.

I said, "Who the hell are you?"

"The Black President." He was just a little defensive.

"Get out of my office," I said.

He looked at my clothes, a bit shocked at the sight of them.

"You shouldn't be wearing —" he started to say. There was a small explosion of rage and confusion in my head. I lunged across the desk and grabbed for his shirt, meaning to haul him out of his chair and — and do something, I don't know what, something violent.

But he rolled his chair backward just far enough. I sprawled across the desk, out of balance, clutching at air. And he didn't say a word. He simply watched me, with some pity on his face and some horror. I was dead, to his mind, and I ought to stay dead.

The violence went out of me. I knew what a fool I looked, sprawling there on the desk when by rights it should be I on the other side of it,

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perfectly safe, with people coming in afraid of me, and trying not to show it.

I straightened up and pulled down my cuffs, settled my illegal clothing around me. Quietly I said, "A Black President can be appointed only if his predecessor dies. You know that. What does it make you?"

"You're not alive," he said, and added, "holy one."

"Stop that!" I said impatiently. After a moment I added, "I suppose the publicity went out while I was unconscious. Who stole my soul? You?"

He nodded.

"Who ordered it?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere, holy one," he said. "You'd better see the White President."

I breathed out slowly. So that was it. When either President dies, the survivor appoints his successor. When either President breaks a taboo, the other one administers justice. So Thornvald had taken matters into his own hands, without a word to me, behind my back, while I was sick and unconscious.

. . .

"I'll see him," I said, and turned away toward the door to the bridge. With my hand on the knob, I looked back. It was a strange feeling. Nothing had changed in my office except the man behind the desk. Everything was just as I'd always had it, all the things in a person's office that he gets used to, that become a part of him finally. And they were still a part of me. But they were also linked, now, to the man in my chair. It was like a webwork with two centers, and sometimes one set of strands seemed real, sometimes the other.

"I'll be back," I said, and went out across the bridge.

Again, as always, it was like walking the eagle's way above the two-mile sprawl of Communications Center. At the other end of it was Thornvald, standing by a window looking down. All the anger boiled up in me at the sight of him, and perhaps there was fear with the anger, now.

I slammed the door behind me as hard as I could.

He jumped and whirled.

"Does that sound like a ghost, you bastard?" I asked him.

He opened his mouth, raised his eyebrows, and let out his breath with a resigned sound. I told him what I thought of him, loud and fast. It took a couple of minutes. But when I ran out of breath his expression hadn't changed.

I walked over to his desk, yanked out the chair behind it and sat down. Thornvald watched me.

"Now," I said. "Let's get a few things straight. There's somebody in my office who thinks he's the Black President. What's the idea? How did you ever make such a mistake, Karl? When I was flat on my back and unconscious, too!"

"It's no mistake, holy one," Thornvald said.

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"Don't call me that! You know my name."

His round face looked at me sadly.

"I'm sorry to see this attitude in you, holy one. It shows a lack of faith that may be dangerous to your soul. I'm afraid —"

"Never mind my soul. I'll be around for a long time yet. I want to know why you double-crossed me when I couldn't defend myself."

"There was no double-cross, holy one. I take my orders from the Eagle. Surely you don't think I'd do such a thing on my own responsibility? You broke the taboo of the clan, and the Eagle has taken you."

"The Eagle has not taken me!" I yelled at him. "And what taboo did I break? Name one. Just one!"

"I felt uneasy from the first about it," Thornvald said obliquely. "About Haliaia, I mean. But even when Mumm made a formal accusation against you, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't think any man who knew the dangers as well as you do could risk his soul for personal gain like that."

"I wouldn't. I didn't!"

Thornvald just shook his head sadly again.

"Why do you think I did?" I shouted at him, wanting to beat sense into him with my fists. He was so damned dogmatic about it. "Did you look up Rabb's papers? Did you find the least scrap of evidence that I'd break a sacred taboo? Prove it, Thornvald! Prove it!"

He pointed to my forehead where I could feel the red circle as if it were a tangible burn on the skin.

"There's proof," he said. "Would the Eagle move against you if you weren't guilty?"

I almost choked on all the things I wanted to say. But I had to keep my head.

"That's a result, not a cause, Karl," I said in a strangled voice. "The Eagle didn't move against me. You did. You accepted a lot of malicious gossip from an enemy of mine, and then you sneaked up behind me and stabbed me when I was too sick to defend myself. You —"

"I accepted the evidence of my own eyes," Thornvald said tartly. "I suspected the Eagle was punishing you when you had all the trouble with the sacred drug. And of course when you broke your thumb, and then the Eagle sent the influenza germs —"

"The Eagle didn't send anything! That was probably Mumm, if it was —"

"Mumm?" He looked shocked. "A President knowingly casting a spell on another President? I'm surprised at you, holy one. He wouldn't dare. His totem would strike him down in his tracks. No, it was the Eagle, holy one. And I knew when the Eagle allowed these curses to fall on you one after another what the truth must be. I knew it even before the Eagle came to me in the night and gave me my orders."

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"So you appointed a new Black President, and his first job was my death sentence," I said.

Thornvald nodded.

"Karl, have you ever made a mistake?" I asked.

"Often, holy one. But never about sacred things, because I act only when the Eagle commands me. A President has to renounce his own desires. You should have remembered that."

"Have you ever mistaken the Eagle's commands?"

I think that shook him a little. Such a thought had obviously never hit him before. But he shook his head decisively.

"Never in my life. Never! How could I?"

"You could," I said grimly. "You just have." I stood up and leaned over to slam the desk hard with my fist. "I'll tell you exactly what happened, Karl. You wanted to get rid of me. *You* had a personal motive. Not me, but you. You know the dogma, Karl. We accuse others of the sin we most want to commit ourselves. Ask yourself, isn't it true? No, don't answer me, Karl — just ask yourself in your own mind. And listen! You heard jealous gossip against me. You watched your chance. When I had a run of bad luck you took it for magic because you wanted to believe that way. You injected a drug or inhaled hemp or hypnotized yourself, and you had a dream. Just a plain dream, not a sacred vision. But you took this dream for a fact because you wanted to. For *your* selfish reasons you misused your holy power against me! And you won't get away with it, Thornvald! The Eagle won't let you!"

His fat face was pale as he gaped at me, horrified.

"It isn't true! It can't be true!"

"It can and is, and I'll prove it!" I hit the desk again, feeling fine. I had him this time. "Magic can't touch me!" I said. "Magic based on sin can't hurt a man when the Eagle protects him. The Eagle came to *me* last night, and gave me his sacred promise. I won't die, Thornvald. You may as well call off your soul-stealing spell right now, because it isn't going to work. *I won't die.*"

The color flooded back into his fat cheeks. He was shaking.

"You have to die. Once a spell's under way, there's no process for undoing it." His voice was shaky.

I shrugged. He was probably right. I'd never heard of a reversal, once the spell's been publicized.

"It's your funeral," I said. "Either way, you lose. Because *I'm not going to die.*"

He shut his eyes and gripped his hands together.

"The Eagle told me," he said, his voice a little desperate. "I know! I've committed no sin. You'll see for yourself, holy one, when you've finished your journey to the spirit world."

"You'll get there before I do," I told him.

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He put his hand over his eyes and recited a short formula against totemic sin. Without looking at me, his hand still up, he said:

"Go home, holy one. Leave me. You've disturbed me very much; but I know you're unhappy. I must allow for that. Go back and put on your sacred tunic and prepare for the funeral ceremony. You'll see more clearly when you have flown with the Eagle."

I laughed at him and went out.

Halfway home, on the moving-way, reaction hit me. Dizziness and exhaustion made my head go around and around. The next thing I knew I was waking in my own bed, draped in black, in the darkened and empty house. I had on that damned blue tunic with the Eagle on the chest and the clothes I had taken were gone.

I lay there for quite a while, thinking. Finally I got up and made my way unsteadily down the escalator to the front door. Black dishes of food on the doorstep, black wreath on the door. Nobody looking at me as I stood on the step in the sunshine.

Before I took in the food I did something I hadn't thought of the last time I stood here. I checked the date of my proposed funeral on the wreath. Anyone who cared to read it could see it written in large figures among the decorations. I was scheduled to die in ten days.

Technically I wasn't a spirit yet. I was moving toward the spirit world in a sort of social limbo, separated from society, partaking more and more of the sacredness of my totem. For ten more days nobody would speak to me or hear me if I spoke. There wasn't much I could do — until the funeral.

But then, when the guests arrived and the ceremonies began, and the corpse refused to lie down and die . . .

How would Thornvald handle it? What would he do? In his shoes, I'd make very sure the corpse died on schedule by adding a little something to his food. I wondered about Thornvald. Somehow it didn't seem in character, but I had better take no more chances than I could help. The incubation period of germs is too chancy, if you've got to hit a certain date right on the nose. A poison administered later on, toward the critical day, would be the obvious thing. I thought it was fairly safe to go on eating the dead man's dinner they set on my doorstep for a few days longer, if I had to. Right now I had no choice. I was still weak.

Later on, feeling much better, I went out again, helped myself to another suit of clothes, rode the moving way to a theater and relaxed, dozing, in one of the best cushioned seats until the performance was over. It was all right, except that all the seats for ten rows round me emptied the moment I settled in. The circle on my fore-

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head shone in the dark, and even the actors on the screen seemed almost aware of me. I felt very self-conscious.

On the way home I stopped in a restaurant. The waiters wouldn't come near me. I had to find a cafeteria to get food. Everywhere I moved in a little eddy of shocked surprise, because while people were not technically aware of me at all, they couldn't help reacting to the blasphemous behavior of a dead man who wouldn't wear the sacred tunic or restrict himself to his house of mourning and his sacred food. It was a very discouraging day. I warmed myself with thoughts of the funeral, and the repercussions throughout the clan when something unheard-of happened.

I slept that night like the — no, put it that I slept very well. And woke feeling stronger and nearer to normal. As usual, I found myself back in the blue tunic and with the street clothes gone again. It was a little alarming to think of those silent, unseen undertakers who moved so confidently through the house when I was unconscious. I had never before wondered just how they operated, but it seemed likely they used some kind of soporific gas to make sure I stayed asleep while they undressed and dressed me. A vague twinge of alarm in my mind dissipated as I considered that they were almost certainly not corruptible to the point of poisoning me while I slept. Even if Thornvald wasn't afraid of the Eagle, he'd hardly dare lay himself open to blackmail. . . . And what was to prevent his coming in while I slept and doing the job himself? Nothing. Nothing at all, except his own superstitions. Everything would depend on that — on how much the magicians believed in their own magic.

I got up and shrugged off the problem. What I could guard against, I would. For the rest, that was on the wings of the Eagle. I might as well enjoy my remaining nine days.

They were a very long nine days. Did you ever think how little there is a man can do alone? I've read that Robinson Crusoe didn't have a personality until Friday arrived on the island. Well, I felt that I was losing my personality. I wasn't the Black President any more, my name itself was taboo, and I wasn't even alive, according to society's viewpoint. I was a spirit, though not a very cooperative one — not as cooperative as Haliaia had been, certainly.

A man can't do much alone. He thinks too much. And he worries. And when he worries, fear comes. . . .

At first, I thought of Flamme. It took me a while to find her. TV information wouldn't help, because the operator saw my face on the screen, and the red circle on my forehead, and cut me off. I tried a robot directory, but that cut me

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off too; apparently even the electronic calculators had been informed that my serial number was no longer the property of a living man. Finally I gave a false serial number and got Flamme's new address.

She had gone back to her old job, modeling.

. . . There's no use thinking about that. I found her, all right. She walked right past me, obviously not hearing a word I said to her. I followed her into a corner, grabbed her by the shoulder. She twisted partly away because I had only one good hand, and couldn't hold her.

"I'm alive!" I said. "Wait, Flamme. See? I'm alive. It's all been a mistake. After the funeral, everyone will know it. Flamme, I —"

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slid out from under my hand to the floor. She's a good solid girl, and she fell with such a thump I knew the faint was genuine. Nobody paid any attention to me as they tried to revive her, but someone must have called for Thornvald, because presently he arrived with all his mumbo-jumbo paraphernalia.

"Contagion, eh?" he said, and shook his head solemnly at me. His eyes were uneasy, but he was determined to go through with the routine to the bitter end, and neither of us said a word about our little set-to in his office.

He said to me in a reproving, official voice, "You shouldn't do this, holy one. I can cast the devil out of this poor girl, I think, but only the Eagle can cast the evil spirit out of you. Go home, put on the sacred robe. Stop eating the food of the living. Why fight against the power of the Eagle?"

"Don't be a fool, Thornvald," I said distinctly. "I'm not going to die." There was a subdued gasp from those who heard, trying to pretend they didn't hear. But I saw no point in following it up. I turned and went out, and a broad path opened up to let me go.

That night, at home, I lay on a downstairs couch to think, and when I got drowsy I realized I hated the idea of the black-draped bed in my room. I decided I would not sleep in it again. I couldn't begin too soon, I realized, to resist the pressure of custom in every way open to me. I dozed off on the couch.

Sometime in the night I dimly remember turning uncomfortably on the hard upholstery. Very faintly, I remember getting up and walking in the dark through the familiar rooms. Riding the escalator was like flying in the night. When I woke I was in my own bed, stretched out on my back, very much like a corpse under the black draperies.

And of course I was again wearing the blue tunic, which meant the undertakers had been about their work in the darkness. Had they led me upstairs? Or had they needed to?

The days went by very slowly. The wait seemed much longer than nine days. You can't do much alone.

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The worst was not having anyone to talk to. I even went back to my office again, knowing Thornvald at least would have to recognize me, but this time they saw me coming and he wasn't there.

Once I had a talk with a child, not old enough yet to understand I didn't exist. We had a very interesting conversation, though somewhat one-sided, until his mother came and dragged him away. He didn't want to go. He told her he'd been talking to a nice man.

"No, son," she said, hurrying him, while he looked back over his shoulder. "That wasn't a man. That was a spirit. You must never talk to spirits."

"Oh. It looked like a man."

"No, it was a spirit."

"Oh," he said, believing her.

She probably took him to Thornvald to get him decontaminated.

There was nothing in the house to read. I went out and helped myself to books and magazines, but the next morning they would be gone. I brought in food, but the undertakers removed that too, as soon as I fell asleep. I slept in other beds in the house, but always I woke in my own.

Pretty soon I found I was spending most of my time in bed, wearing the sacred blue tunic because it was a lot more convenient than anything I had to go out for, and dozing the days and nights away, waking like a nocturnal animal at intervals and prowling around the house, and then dozing again. I had gone back to eating the dead man's food they brought me. There were so many ways Thornvald could get at me if he wanted, it didn't seem worth while to put myself to the trouble of worrying about food.

I had to outwait society. That was all I could do.

One day I glanced in a mirror and saw how haggard and unshaven my face was, with the red circle burning brilliantly on the forehead. I was scared.

"They're getting at you, Lloyd," I said to myself in a voice that echoed hollowly through the house. "Pull yourself together, Lloyd." And I put both hands up on the sides of the mirror and looked myself in the eye. My own were the only human eyes I had met in what seemed an infinitely long time. I touched three fingers to the three fingers on my image in the glass, in the visiphone handshake which is as close as two people can get, with distance between them. I was too far away from my own kind to touch hands even with myself, even with my own image in the glass. There was only the cold feel of the mirror against my fingers.

I shook myself. This was dangerous. I squeezed my hands together, needing the pain of my bandaged thumb to remind me I wasn't yet a spirit. Then I went upstairs and shaved for the first time in days. I

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took a shower and threw the blue tunic down the laundry chute. Wrapped in a sheet, I went back downstairs.

I opened the door and looked out. The street was empty. Society had almost visibly shrunk away from me, the whole fabric detaching itself from the one fragment which was myself. Soon society would return. I had to be ready for them. My only defense was knowledge. I knew that magic had no reality. Objective, logical reasoning power protected me from the mindless emotions of this world of mine. But reason can be attacked by obsession.

Obsession — a persistent idea which I knew was irrational, but which I couldn't get rid of. I knew what the word meant, all right. And its next door neighbor, compulsion, which is the second step. An irresistible impulse to perform an act without the will of the performer. Magic works because of things like these operating in the minds and bodies of believers. It had worked on Jake Haliaia. I remembered him twisting like a fish on his funeral bed writhing like the Fish Totem he thought had entered him.

Obsession, like belief in magic.

Compulsion, like imitating the Fish Totem.

Like dying.

But Haliaia had cooperated with his society in accepting his death by magic. I wasn't going to cooperate. They could isolate me, yes. The mark on my forehead labeled me as a man without a soul, a man moving to the land of the Eagle Totem and the dead. But when they came back to perform the funeral rites, they wouldn't find a willing believer.

I thought what I would do, when the moment came. It would be best, probably, to go along with them, up to a point. Less effective if they found me wandering around the house than if they saw the potential corpse laid out conventionally — until Thornvald spoke the funeral pronouncement.

That would be the moment.

I rehearsed in my mind the familiar anathema every Black President has to learn, the one by which the most terrible curse of the Totem is called down on the most terrible sinner. Thornvald was nearer his last moments than he realized. Or perhaps he did realize. I hoped so. I liked to think of him, worrying and wondering.

It was up to me to depose a White President who made too great an error, just as it had been up to Thornvald to move against me. I could appoint his successor, just as he had tried to appoint mine. I turned over possibilities in my mind, promising young fellows who might do. I felt stimulated and happy — almost happy.

I had a little trouble remembering the anathema. It would have been convenient to have my books at hand to look the wording up. But it didn't matter. Any impressive

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words would do. It was the effect on the listener that mattered, not anything magic inherent in the phrasing. I felt tired, but relaxed and at peace, having decided all this. I knew what to do. I pictured the faces of the people when I sat upon the funeral bed and hurled the anathema in the face of the funeral orator. . . .

I had been standing there for a long time in the doorway, looking out. Now for the first time a man came into sight along the moving way. I thought I knew him. As he came nearer I was sure. I couldn't recall his name, but he was a member of a club I belonged to. I pushed the door wider and leaned out, calling to him.

At first I thought he didn't hear. Then I realized the truth. For a moment, odd as it seems, I'd forgotten.

Terror and rage and immense loneliness flooded through me as I stood there. Dressed or not dressed, I thought, I'll make him listen. I'll run after him and make him listen. . . .

I thought I was running down the steps and along the way after him, and it was like running into the wrong end of a telescope, with the distant vision getting no larger no matter how fast I ran. Then I saw I hadn't moved. My foot was poised on the edge of the step and I hadn't moved at all.

I looked down at my motionless foot, and something swam clearer and clearer into my consciousness. Nearer than my foot. Nearer, and just as much a part of me. I couldn't identify it for a while. But at last I knew what it was. And that was strange — very strange. What I saw was the Eagle Totem on my breast. I saw it as clear as the texture of the sheet, every stitch vivid.

But I wasn't wearing the Eagle Totem tunic at all. I was wearing a plain bed-sheet. . . .

I was absolutely alone.

I lay in bed and tried to think. It was hard to think, because of the sense of blueness around me, and the feeling of weightlessness, of flight, of air rushing strongly past my face. I must have just wakened from a dream.

I thought: Wait. Outwait them. They'll —

The Eagle Totem.

They'll find out the magic doesn't work on a man who doesn't believe. And I don't —

The Eagle.

And I don't believe in it. Even though it was hammered into me since infancy, since I was younger than the child I talked to when I was more alive than I am now —

The Eagle.

Stop it. It's obsession. Here in the half-dark, in the lonely, funeral house, with the fabric of society ripped completely away, there aren't any anchors any more. There's nothing except —

The Eagle.

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But not so isolated any more, not quite so isolated, because here in the blue, moving like flight, there is . . . stop it!

From the thought comes the act. From the obsession comes the compulsion. But that wouldn't happen. I couldn't quite control my thoughts, but at least, somehow, somehow, I knew my own body would not betray me. I could control my own body. If I couldn't, I was no longer myself. I was controlled by — no, not magic. Not the totem. But the terrible force of the society of which I was born a part.

And yet, here, moving through the blue . . .

I've got to stop. I've got to think. I've got to get out of this bed.

I've got to move!

It's easy. One hand. Lift it a little.

Lift it!

The Eagle, the Eagle, the Eagle.

There was a sound of singing. Robed figures moved back and forth in the room. I had a sense the house was crowded.

Move. Move your hand, your arm. If you can move, you can sit up, speak the anathema, break the spell.

Around the wall people knelt, singing. At the foot of the bed — and I could not take my eyes from it — stood the Eagle Totem.

Someone was walking around the bed, chanting. I knew the voice. Lila.

She had come back. She was a believer again. She believed in magic, as she had in the days before I told her too much of the truth, and now, as I had known would happen when I stole Haliaia's soul, the terrible force of society's power had snuffed out the small flame of reason I had lighted in her mind. I had killed her lover by magic. She believed that now. And she believed in all the rest of the ritual too — the spiritual marriage which can never be dissolved, in spite of temporal divorce. So she was here, my closest kin, to chant the death song at the Rite of Passage.

She moved like a puppet, without will, the light of truth in her mind gone out forever.

I couldn't speak. But I had to move. I'd got Lila back now, but I knew, at last, that I did not want her back on these terms, without her soul. I tried to tell her to go. I tried to tell her that there was no magic here or anywhere, there was only suggestibility and fear, smothering reality and truth.

I could not speak or move.

I had to move. To save myself and to save Lila. Not from death; that did not matter. Men have always died. But to live in darkness — to stumble mindlessly through an imitation world of false idols . . .

I had to move. Then I could break the spell. Then I could pronounce the anathema and these fools would believe my magic was the strongest. I could live again, and this time I would tell the truth,

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though I died for it. I would light the flame of reason and knowledge in Lila's mind again, and spread that flame in other minds until, God willing, it might sweep around the whole world and burn away the false idols whose shadows kept the world in darkness.

But first I had to move.

Why couldn't I move? I didn't believe . . . I knew the truth . . .

Yet waves of power beat through me, from the puppet-woman walking around the bed, from the death-chanters along the wall, from everyone in the crowded house . . . from everyone in the world. They believed.

I didn't believe, but they believed.

No, I didn't believe. Unless part of me did, my deep, unconscious, very ancient memories, solid as granite now, first laid down before I could even speak or walk. But there was no Eagle Totem . . . there were no totems . . . no magic. I knew that. Yet I couldn't move, for when I tried, a black and paralyzing horror made me weak and faint, as though I faced the Eagle, as though I believed in the Eagle.

Lila was a puppet that moved to and fro. The funeral chanters wailed and swayed. The robed figures moved faceless through the house. I could see the walls transparent as glass, with every figure under my roof clearly in sight, upstairs and down. I could see beyond the house, all through the city, where all the thousands of men and women faced toward me and thrust me into darkness with the power of their belief. And beyond the city and the clan, the other cities and clans . . . millions of men and women blending into a great living organism mightier and more terrible than any god.

This is the monster. Society is the monster. Society that took that small wrong turning which led us all to the here and the now. Fear drives us all. Fear makes us blind to truth and opens our inward vision to the falsehood in which alone we could find safety.

I was no better than the rest. No, I was worse, for knowing the truth, I let fear destroy me. Fear of losing Lila, fear of what society would do if I spoke what I knew. What I knew? There is no Eagle, no magic, but there is terror and a juggernaut of monstrous power. Before that monster I lay paralyzed with the fear that centuries had nourished.

Nothing else is real. Everything else has vanished. Only the monster remains. Reality itself is corrupted until only falsehood is real now. And like the juggernaut, our society drives headlong into the abyss, and like the juggernaut it crushes Lila and me as it has already crushed truth.

And so . . .

I am the Eagle.

Am I? Is it too late? No — Lila, we aren't puppets! We can fight . . . I'll fight for you. I'll save you . . . save myself. The monster isn't real. The truth can destroy it.

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If I can only speak the truth — *if I can move!*

The monster sweeps forward, hovers over me. The Rite of Passage wails across the room, the city, the world. My Rite of Passage, and mankind's. A light is going out, somewhere.

Lila . . .

I *can* move.

Now I can move.

My arms are moving, beating against my sides, faster and faster through the empty blueness.

. . . *The beating of great wings.*

A CHECKLIST OF BOOKS BY HENRY KUTTNER AND C. L. MOORE

Science-fantasy novels:

FURY, by Henry Kuttner (Grosset & Dunlap, 1950; originally published in magazine form as by Lawrence O'Donnell)

WELL OF THE WORLDS, by Lewis Padgett (Galaxy, 1953; originally by Kuttner)

BEYOND EARTH'S GATES, by Lewis Padgett and C. L. Moore (Ace, 1954; originally by Kuttner)

Science-fantasy collections:

A GNOME THERE WAS, by Lewis Padgett (Simon & Schuster, 1950; 11 stories, originally by Kuttner and Padgett)

TOMORROW AND TOMORROW & THE FAIRY CHESSMEN, by Lewis Padgett (Gnome, 1951; 2 short novels)

ROBOTS HAVE NO TAILS, by Lewis Padgett (Gnome, 1952; 5 stories)

JUDGMENT NIGHT, by C. L. Moore (Gnome, 1952; title novel, plus 4 stories originally by O'Donnell)

AHEAD OF TIME, by Henry Kuttner (Ballantine, 1953; 10 stories, originally by Kuttner, Kuttner-Moore, Padgett and C. H. Liddell)

MUTANT, by Lewis Padgett (Gnome, 1953; 5 stories in a quasi-novel framework)

SHAMBLEAU AND OTHERS, by C. L. Moore (Gnome, 1953; 7 stories)

LINE TO TOMORROW, by Lewis Padgett (Bantam, 1954; 7 stories, originally by Kuttner and Padgett)

NORTHWEST OF EARTH, by C. L. Moore (Gnome, 1954; 7 stories)

NO BOUNDARIES, by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore (Ballantine, 1955; 5 stories, originally by Kuttner, Kuttner-Moore and O'Donnell)

Mystery novels:

THE BRASS RING, by Lewis Padgett (Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946)

THE DAY HE DIED, by Lewis Padgett (Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947)

MAN DROWNING, by Henry Kuttner (Harper, 1952)

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Mr. Coward Gets There First

I always imagined a journey to Mars
Was rather my cup of tea;
But even the pilot found nothing to smile at
Unless he was smiling at me.
I'm terribly proud to *be* here,
Although the voyage was grim —
So grim that a stowaway gave the whole show away;
It was too, too horrid for him.

But we made it;
And I'm glad, though I couldn't be more mad,
For I'm afraid it
Is not what I imagined it would be.
But a Briton should display, every day,
Some emotion (just a little)
In an accent rather brittle —
And since no one can display it quite like me,
I displayed it.

To appear in a Martian revue, I presumed,
Would be madly exciting and gay:
But I'm sorry to state I discovered too late
That it wouldn't work out that way.
For nobody's heard of *me* here —
There's a gap in their lives. I could fill it,
But *is* cabaret fun when chaps jab a ray gun
At an act they dislike? It'll kill it!

I shall taunt them:
Since my talents can throw humans off their balance,
I shall flaunt them —
And they'll probably consider me a hoot.
If the audience decide that I've tried
In vain to entertain them
Shall I bother to restrain them?
I'll do nothing of the sort. Let them shoot:
I shall haunt them!

I'm excessively proud in a tight-lipped way
To be first of the many on Mars
(At last I can gain a few steps on Marlene),
And I thank my lucky stars
I've a chance to collect a big fee here —
It would *not* be a matter for mirth
To miss the sublime light of Martian limelight
By falling smack back to the earth!

ANTHONY BRODE

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G. C. Edmondson is a new writer (this is his debut in F&SF and his second sale anywhere) who has, he tells us, "bummed about Latin America and held the usual unbelievable series of jobs every writer has had at one time or another." All such jobs are eventually useful to a storyteller; this particular tale evolved from Mr. Edmondson's experience in the not overpopulated profession of serape-importing. It's a dry, funny, sad story, logically inevitable and leaving only one question unanswered: What is *the age referred to in paragraph three?*

Technological Retreat

by G. C. EDMONDSON

ONCE THERE WERE TWO EXTRA-terrestrials, hereafter referred to as ETs. They sat down on a nice looking planet and shifted to visible spectrum right in front of a native.

The native was a good, solid citizen but not exactly what you'd call a fuddy duddy. There's television and then all those books the kids bring home. Still, it startled him to see a big, round something materialize out of thin air and a couple of humpbacked entities with faces like catfish come out of it. They were friendly looking catfishes though, so Oliver Jenkins wasn't frightened.

Oliver Jenkins was not an ET. He was a rather short and puffy specimen of the dominant race on Sol III and had reached an age where the balance of power has begun an imperceptible shift from gonads to cerebrum. He owed allegiance to the Kiwanis, the Chamber of Commerce, the Republican party, and the United States, though he highly disapproved of the way those idiots in Washington kept meddling with an honest businessman's right to an honest profit.

Mr. Jenkins possessed a highly developed sense of community responsibility. He contributed to everything and was a member of a politico-religio-social group whose talisman he proudly dangled from a gold chain transversing his chest. He was in the habit of fingering this talisman, the bleached molar of a local herbivore.

At the moment, Mr. Jenkins was too startled to finger his talisman. Besides, he'd left it home. No point in wearing it out here where he'd

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not be meeting any brother herbivores. It got in the way for dry fly casting and loyal herbivore that he was, still, Mr. Jenkins wasn't going to let anything interfere with the second most important thing in life. Wasn't, that is, until this big round thing showed up and spooked every rainbow in the pool. He was annoyed with the realization that there'd be no more fishing this morning and doubly annoyed that these two outlanders had made him involuntarily take on a bootful of sparkling, mountain-clear, and icy cold water.

The taller of the two ETs waved in a friendly way and Jenkins, not to be outdone, waved back. The ET's mouth moved and an astonishingly loud voice said, "*Buenos días; ¿puedo interesarle en algún trato comercial?*"

Jenkins made the local I-do-not-understand gesture and started climbing from the pool. The ET fumbled with a knob at his waist and tried again. "Terribly sorry, old man," he continued; "must have dropped a decimal point somewhere." As Jenkins moved closer he could hear an undertone of buzzes and clicks from the ET's mouth as the English phrases issued from his belt buckle. "Never could learn to set one of these things," the ET continued conversationally. Jenkins nodded sympathetically. He often had similar troubles with his own appliances.

"As I was saying—" the ET continued. "Oh, by the way, my name's Chorl. This is my partner, Tuchi."

"Jenkins, Oliver Jenkins. Glad to meet you." Jenkins extended his hand and it was shaken flaccidly by a clammy finger cluster with an opposed thumb at each end. After a moment's hesitation Tuchi joined in the native ritual. "*Eaut sirtam matcal da mutnemercxe,*" he said conversationally. Chorl waggled a deprecatory lip tentacle and adjusted Tuchi's belt buckle.

Oliver Jenkins sat on a log and removed his boot. As he poured water from it Chorl whipped a handbook from a pouch. He flipped pages for several seconds before looking at Mr. Jenkins in piscine amazement. "I don't wish to offend, old man, but the handbook says nothing about intelligent amphibians on this planet."

"I'm not an amphibian, I'm an American," Jenkins answered.

"But the leg moisteners — how do you breathe?"

"Through my nose like any sensible man."

"Oh." Chorl twiddled a lip tentacle thoughtfully. "Mr. Jenkins, we're not scientists. I don't understand just how you breathe but we'll let that go. Are you interested in trade?"

Mr. Jenkins' nostrils quivered. He could suffer an interruption of the second most important thing in life if it might lead to a little of the first. "Well, I'm not opposed to making an honest profit now and then but . . . According to those

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stories the kids read, the only thing you fellows'd want would be reactor fuel and you might as well forget about that. Those bureaucrats've got it sewed up tight."

Chorl buzzed sympathetically. "Frankly, Mr. Jenkins, we couldn't use your reactor fuel even if you could get it. Oh, no, it isn't that," he added as Mr. Jenkins' throat pouches began palpitating. "We aren't equipped to process fuel. You must understand, ours is a small enterprise."

"I see," Mr. Jenkins said untruthfully.

"Specifically, we're looking for local artifacts—curios—possibly foods if we find them assimilable."

"Hmmm . . . Have a cigar." Mr. Jenkins produced three and tutored the ETs in the intricacies of biting off the end. This entailed some difficulty as their dental equipment lacked incisors. The ETs took one puff each and dived into the creek with glottal hoots which their belt buckles did not interpret. Jenkins mentally scratched the pool from his list of trout haunts as they raced up and down like seals in a swimming pool.

Eventually they emerged and harrumphed, blowing a fine spray from gill slits. "I'm afraid cigars won't do," Chorl said.

"I guess not." Jenkins agreed sadly. "Well, I don't have any samples here. Why not come with me —?"

"I don't think it wise," Chorl said hastily. "We might cause excitement."

"You going to be here long?"

"A few days."

"I'll be back this afternoon with a truckload of samples."

"Alone?"

"Does Macy's tell Gimbel's?"

Oliver Jenkins spent a hectic four hours in town and rushed back to the ETs after giving wife and employees lame excuses. In his haste he skidded from the dirt road down to the creekbed and banged up a perfectly good left front fender. Chorl and Tuchi pawed through an assortment of samples from bed warmers to halvah. After untranslated clicks and buzzes and an occasional expectoration while food sampling they settled on caviar, roll-mop herrings, smoked oysters and anchovy paste as possible media of exchange.

"Now, what do you have?" Jenkins demanded.

Tuchi went to the sphere and emerged with a cone-like affair on a pedestal. He pressed a switch and waves of fluorescence began coruscating over its surface. The two ETs stared glassily and vibrated lip tentacles in unison with the coruscations.

"I'm afraid not." Jenkins said.

Tuchi shrugged the place where his shoulders weren't and took the cone back inside. He came out with a plastic globe and made illustrative motions. Jenkins smelled cautiously

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but detected nothing. He bit on the nipple and strangled as a high pressure jet of something like rancid cod liver oil threatened to uproot his tonsils. The ETs exchanged helpless glances as Jenkins lay gagging in the grass.

They produced other viands but Mr. Jenkins wasn't having any. "There must be something else," he protested weakly.

The ETs buzzed and clicked. Chorl apparently won the argument and turned. "This asymmetrical portion of your vehicle," he pointed at the dented fender. "It should not be thus?" Jenkins nodded. Chorl produced a tube about like a fountain pen and pointed it at the fender. In a moment he pocketed the tube and put a two thumbed hand behind the fender. With the other hand he smoothed out the dent as if the metal were pie dough. He pointed the tube at the fender again for an instant. Jenkins thumped the fender cautiously. It was solid as ever.

"How many can you supply me?" he asked.

A short period ensued in which each party swore the other would drive him to ruin. When both sides were ruined Mr. Jenkins possessed seven hundred forty tubes and an exclusive franchise for Sol III. The ETs owned thirty-eight dollars and eight cents worth of delicatessen. They promised to return next trip and gave Jenkins a talisman to hang beside his magic molar. The talisman would change color when they were ready to meet him at the same spot. The ETs sealed their sphere and went invisible. The native stayed visible and went back to town.

Oliver Jenkins had sold two tubes with maximum profit and minimum publicity when there came a knock on the door. "Simpson, FBI" the knocker said.

"I file a return every quarter," Mr. Jenkins said.

"Take it up with Internal Revenue. I want to hear about those tools you're selling."

"Guaranteed for sixty-eight years, fifty per cent duty cycle. Maximum capacity eight feet, thirty degree cone of effectiveness. Affects metals only. Use the left hand button to soften, right hand to harden. The dial on the back's for temper settings if you're working steel. One thousand dollars."

"That isn't exactly what I wanted to know."

"No other information available. Company secret."

"Get your coat."

"That's unconstitutional."

"So's spitting on the sidewalk."

Brigadier General George S. Carnhouser was not noted for his self restraint. He had chosen the Army as the field most suited for full development of his lovable, paternalistic personality. At the moment he was reasoning with Mr. Oliver Jenkins.

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"But what if the Russians should get hold of it?" he was saying.

"I'm not an inventor and I'm not a manufacturer," Mr. Jenkins said. "I'm in the importing business whenever people let me alone long enough to tend to business."

"But think, man, think of the possibilities." General Carnhouser's attitude of sweet reasonableness was spoiled by the throbbing veins in his temples.

"I'm tired of thinking. I've told the FBI what they want to know. I've broken no law. I demand to be released immediately."

"What about import duties?" The general was grasping at straws.

Mr. Jenkins drew himself up in puffy dignity. He fondled twin talismans and drew strength. "I have made a detailed study," he said magnificently, "of Schedule A, Statistical Classification of Commodities Imported into the United States with Rates of Duty and Tariff Paragraphs and Code Classification for Countries (Schedule C), United States Customs Districts and Ports (Schedule D), and Flag of Vessel Registry (Schedule J), January 1, 1954 Edition, and aproximately eight hundred pages of looseleaf inserts concerning later revisions thereof. In no part do I see any reference specifically prohibiting importation of pocket plasticizers. In no part do I see any scale of import duties for said merchandise. In no part is there any express prohibition of interstellar trade."

General Carnhouser's rebuttal was unprintable. He conceded to Rear Admiral Schiffführer, the Lord Nelson of naval intelligence.

"I pass," the admiral said.

"I demand to be released immediately," Mr. Jenkins said.

"Why don't you do something?" the admiral and the general demanded of the CIA man.

The man from Central Intelligence looked speculatively at the molar dangling from Mr. Jenkins' gold chain. "I will," he said.

The next morning they started again.

"Mr. Jenkins," the CIA man began, "we have investigated your entire background and find no irregularities in political opinion, ideological associations, or income tax returns. We want your cooperation." He paused for dramatic effect. "Does your wife know what goes on at those lodge conventions? I refer specifically to the September, 1951 blowoff in Chicago."

"I'll cooperate," Mr. Jenkins said. Four hours later the government had seven hundred thirty-eight tubes. Mr. Jenkins had several vague promises and a headache.

Four days later Simpson knocked on the door again.

"Now what?" Mr. Jenkins asked.

"Get your coat," Simpson said.

"Again?"

"Mr. Jenkins," the CIA man began, "we feel you have been less than frank with us. Approximately

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eight hours ago a highly placed Soviet official deserted to the west. He intended to live quietly on the proceeds from a new process developed in a Soviet laboratory. He brought a working model." The CIA man tossed a plasticizer tube on the table. "Now what have you to say?"

"Hah," Mr. Jenkins replied.

"You're not cooperating," the CIA man said.

"I cooperated and what did I get out of it? My business is going to pot; my wife wants to know what I'm doing leaving the house at all hours with strangers; you've confiscated all my stock. . . . Go ahead and shoot me. Meanwhile, take that tool and jam it. Maybe it'll help get the lead out."

"May we understand then that you refuse further cooperation?"

"You may. I hope they bring me something to soften bone next trip."

"Aha! So they're coming back?"

"Why shouldn't they? Business is business."

"When?"

"None of your business."

"You'd better tell Mrs. Jenkins to get the guest room ready. Simpson here is going to be living with you for quite a while."

Simpson's unsmiling countenance had graced the Jenkins household for a week. His grim jaws had masticated an incredible quantity of food before the next development came.

"I take it as a matter of course that your government doubledomes have been unable to duplicate the plasticizer," Mr. Jenkins observed sourly over the rim of his coffee cup.

"I couldn't say," Simpson replied. It was becoming apparent that Simpson couldn't say much of anything. He choked on toast and suddenly snatched the morning paper from Mr. Jenkins' hands. A quarter-page ad offered the plasticizer to one and all for forty-nine ninety-five (federal tax included).

"Let's go," Simpson said, grabbing for his hat.

"In my car, I suppose," Jenkins said resignedly.

The CIA man and a Treasury man were already closeted with the manager of the Peerless Department Store when they arrived. Simpson barged in anyway with Mr. Jenkins in tow. There was a short and illuminating discussion of the Peerless Department Store's interpretation of the capital gains clause in 1952 and the manager decided production difficulties and faulty design would make it necessary to withdraw the plasticizer from the market. A whispering campaign was planned to put the blame squarely on Big Business.

In an hour things were arranged to the satisfaction of everybody but the Peerless Department Store manager and Mr. Jenkins. On the street again Jenkins turned to his shadow with an evil smile. "I see something you don't see," he purred. Simpson looked around. An auto supply

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store was featuring a do-it-yourself body and fender repair kit. The main article of the kit was you-know-what. Mr. Jenkins observed in grim satisfaction that the price was already down to twenty-four ninety-five.

"I suppose you have an exclusive franchise too?" Mr. Jenkins said to the auto supply manager.

"No," the manager said. "What's this all about?"

"Ask Simpson. He's in charge."

"I'll have to call Washington," Simpson said.

"Don't tell me he slept here too."

A seedy-looking devotee of free enterprise saw them come from the store. "Hey!" he called softly. They paused. "See them?" He pointed to the plasticizer display. "Avoid the middleman. Fourteen ninety-five." He opened his coat and Mr. Jenkins observed that the fourteen ninety-five model featured a clip to keep it from falling out of a shirt pocket. Simpson's eyes were becoming glassy.

They arrived home late that night but Mr. Jenkins' children waited up to show off their new toys. "How much did you pay for it?" Jenkins asked.

"A dollar," Oliver Junior answered.

Simpson sat down heavily.

"Heck," Olivia volunteered, "I only paid forty-nine cents for mine. Look daddy." She offered two crudely fashioned coffee cups.

"How did you make those?" Mr. Jenkins asked.

"It's easy, look." Olivia, important in the knowledge that she would be eight next week, gathered a handful of lead soldiers, model railway track, erector set parts, and a tomato can. She played the tool on the mess and kneaded it into a ball. After a minute's work with rolling pin and fingers she offered Simpson an ash tray for his forgotten cigarette.

Horace Crannach was unhappy. He poured another cup of coffee and sat looking morosely at the rollaway where his body and fender tools were gathering an even patina of rust. His eye lit on a plasticizer. "Ninety-six dollars I paid for that," he moaned. "Two weeks later they're down to ten cents and every woman in town bumps out her own fenders. I shoulda been a carpenter."

From the other side of the half wall his partner volunteered an obbligato. "You should gripe. I ain't worked on an engine for a month. I was just gettin' ready to start the last job when the wiseacre trots in and says, 'Hold it, I'll do it myself.' "

"And did he?"

"He did. Softened up the block and pushed the pistons through the holes a couple of times. That handled the rebore. He seated the valves by hand and took up the rods and mains with two fingers. I sold him a water pump seal. That's not made of metal."

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"Gentlemen," William J. Volante said impressively, "the presses are obsolete. The forges can go. We need no longer haggle with tool and die makers. We'll put a crew of girls to hand-forming parts directly over the plaster mockups. No reason why we shouldn't produce a new model every six months. Mr. Archer of Accounting informs me that tooling-up should cost approximately two per cent of our previous estimates. In view of this it seems practical to announce a two percent across the board price reduction for all models —"

Mr. Mardsell cleared his throat delicately. "Ummm, I'm afraid not, Mr. Volante. Have you seen our latest sales figures? No? I thought not. The big four are offering super-deluxe models with radio, heater, foglites, window lifts, power brakes, power steering, airconditioning, folding beds, engines — the works for eleven hundred."

Volante seemed suddenly older than his sixty-eight years. His mouth opened and closed like a grounded flounder and he sat down weakly. Mr. Archer poured him a glass of water.

"Don't worry," Mardsell continued, "they aren't selling any better than we are. It seems the do-it-yourself bug has hit the automotive industry too."

FLASH! PRANKSTERS STRIKE AGAIN. SAN FRANCISCO, *Oct. 16 (AP)*—— *Pranksters last night softened cables on the main span of the Golden Gate Bridge. Cars backed up for seven miles as commuters waited for low tide. Four hundred yards of the center span are now awash at high tide. City officials are issuing emergency calls to neighboring coastal cities for ferries to replace the unsafe bridge.*

The truck driver wiped perspiration from his forehead with a hairy forearm. "I don't care what the old man says," he addressed his swamper and two squirrels who gazed curiously at the semi rig from an overhanging pine tree. "I'm walking the rest of the way." His swamper nodded emphatic agreement. "It's disconcerting," the driver continued, "to be barreling down the hill and have your engine turn into putty. One of these days some brat's going to hit a front axle or a wheel and I don't want to be driving when he does."

"You see in this morning's paper what happened to the Twentieth Century Limited?" his swamper asked.

"Oh no!" the driver groaned.

"Oh yes. Some kid needed eight or ten feet of track."

"How do you like them apples?" the CIA man asked.

"Go cry on somebody else's shoulder," Mr. Jenkins replied. "I cooperated. You've still got all seven hundred thirty-eight of mine." They walked out of the building. The government limousine had been

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converted to a small pile of slush during their absence. "By the way, what happened to that Russian who claimed to have invented these things?"

"I understand they have their troubles too," the CIA man smiled grimly. "Somebody discovered soft tommy guns don't shoot very straight so now all the comrades are kneading their plowshares into swords."

Tuchi buzzed and clicked for several minutes. Since no humans were listening the voice did not come from his belt buckle. If it had the conversation might have ended something like this:

"You did all the talking; now talk yourself out of this."

"What do you mean, talk myself out of this?" Chorl was indignant. "You talk as if it were my fault."

"Well, isn't it?"

"How should I know?" He stopped abruptly as another band of natives approached the opposite creek bank. The leader of the band threw a stone ax and the ETs ducked barely in time.

"Maybe they have a different growth rate. It took us maybe a hundred and ten of their revolutions to make the trip home and back. I'll admit it's rather swift but civilizations do break up, especially primitive ones."

"So what are we going to do with a hundred million plasticizers?"

"Tell me what you're going to do about the delay penalty clause in that caviar contract and I'll tell you what to do with the plasticizers."

"I just don't understand it," Chorl said.

Across the creek a group of natives were gathering stones for a catapult. Their leader wore a gold chain about his neck. There dangled from it the molar of a local herbivore and another talisman glowing bright red.

Note:

If you enjoy THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, you will like some of the other MERCURY PUBLICATIONS:

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE
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Of Mars and Men

Last December F&SF printed an expanded and even more controversial form of Dr. R. S. Richardson's already controversial article, The Day After We Land on Mars, *originally published in the* Saturday Review *(May 28, 1955). The controversial element lay not in Dr. Richardson's hardheaded common sense about spaceflight, but in his conclusion that "we may be forced into first tolerating and finally openly accepting an attitude toward sex that is taboo in our present social framework. . . . To put it bluntly, may it not be necessary for the success of the project to send some nice girls to Mars at regular intervals to relieve tensions and promote morale?" Dr. Richardson predicted that "Many will be outraged at the mention of such an idea. They will object that it is shockingly immoral." I think it characteristic of science fiction readers that the article elicited more letters than any other non-fiction we've published . . . and that not a single correspondent expressed moral shock and outrage. But the writers, though perfectly willing to grant Richardson's assumption of the relativity of sexual mores, found a number of other points to quarrel with, which are summed up in the two brief rebuttal-articles that follow. First Poul Anderson expresses a few practical male objections to Dr. Richardson's vivandières of the void.*

Nice Girls on Mars

by POUL ANDERSON

A FAMOUS POLAR EXPLORER WAS once asked how he decided when his expedition had been gone long enough. "Well," he said, "I take along the oldest and ugliest woman I can get, as a sort of housekeeper. When she begins to look good to me — I know it's time to go home."

A very similar problem, but immensely intensified, will be faced by the first interplanetary travelers. The voyages will be so long and expensive that rapid rotation of personnel is out of the question. Willy Ley quotes the figure 971 days, some two and two-thirds years, for a

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round trip to Mars on Hohmann "A" orbits, the most economical; this includes a 455-day stay on the planet or in its neighborhood. Venus is not much better. Mercury, so close to the sun that enormous fuel expenditure is required to get there and back, and the great satellites of the outer planets at their vast distances from Earth, are much worse. Furthermore, the Hohmann figures are minimal, applying only to the first expedition. We can't learn much about an entire world in 455 days, especially when so much time will go to merely setting up camp. A really thorough study requires a longer period spent there, or at any rate a great many visits. The latter method would be so costly and inefficient that I think we must count on the investigators (Expedition Two, Three, Four . . . etc.) spending several years away from Earth.

As R. S. Richardson has pointed out, careful thought must be given not only to the engineering but to the human problems involved. Utter isolation in an utterly alien and hostile environment, the grinding combination of danger and monotony, the tight discipline required and its galling effect, could have disastrous results. His most controversial suggestion was, of course, that sexual mores may have to change. The ordinary man cannot spend years without so much as the sight of a woman unless he wants to suffer grave consequences. If nothing else, psychosomatic ailments might become so common as greatly to hamper the work of the men and perhaps make them so inefficient that they can no longer cope with a planet always ready to kill them. Dr. Richardson proposes that it may be necessary to send what, with fine old-world courtesy, he describes as "nice girls" to relieve the tension. The open recognition of this — and it would have to be public, since only governments can afford to launch the exploration of space — would naturally have repercussions on the mores of Earth itself.

Or perhaps it would prevent such expeditions! Not only the United States and Great Britain, but the Soviet Union is notorious for official puritanism. Since the only object of these costly enterprises will be pure knowledge — the chance of finding rich uranium deposits or getting a clue to new "practical" discoveries being quite speculative — these nations may find it politically impossible to carry them out if they must also sanction promiscuity. And all other countries, for a long time to come, may find it financially impossible.

But assuming that this obstacle could be overcome by skillful propaganda, the nice girls would still create more problems than they are likely to solve. Doubtless they could be recruited easily enough; the salary would be high. But just how many girls will you need for a camp of, say, a hundred men? Human flesh can only do so much. And here

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again we run into the problem of fuel needed to lift them off Earth and the added tonnage of equipment needed to keep them alive on Mars. These nice girls would cost a lot more than their wages — which would, indeed, be quite negligible by comparison. Probably they could also do housekeeping chores and secretarial work, but the fact remains that every additional human being you send raises the cost by an astronomical figure. (In this case, the phrase "astronomical figure" does not refer to a nice girl on Mars.) The factor of extra expense is probable one of multiplication rather than addition.

Why all this emphasis on cost? Simply because the bill in terms of money is a convenient shorthand for the true bill, which is expressed in human labor and natural resources. No country is going to impoverish itself for the sake of pure knowledge. Every item we can pare off the list is a real gain and brings the day of space travel closer.

Quite apart from the expense, though, the nice girls would generate tension and discord merely by being there. Dr. Richardson pointed out that the Masai of Kenya have a well-established, perfectly respectable system of promiscuity for young men undergoing a ten years' training period, and that it works fine. The trouble is, we aren't Masai. Western man is an individualistic, possessive creature. If the idea is to work at all, the girls would have to be accepted as full-caste members of the expedition; but that acceptance would remove any psychological barrier to the men's falling in love with them. Probably several men would come to love one girl and resent the attention she paid to everyone else. Or she might even be so inconsiderate as to fall for one of them.

In the light of all this, I think that providing nice girls for the Mars camp is a poor solution at best and no solution at worst. I have no objection to the idea *per se*, but I do object to risking lives and equipment on something as uncertain as this. It is worthwhile to look for alternatives.

If the Greeks of Pericles' time had been in a position to explore space, there wouldn't be much of a problem, since in their culture homosexuality was widely accepted. We, however, are so powerfully conditioned against it that it is a quite impossible "answer." In fact, if we send all-male expeditions, we shall have to convince the public that no such thing is going to take place, or we'll have the devil's own time finding recruits. Who wants to come back from Mars with the reputation of the legendary sheepherder? As for the minor perversions . . . but this is a family magazine.

Well, how about husband-and-wife teams, the expedition made up of couples in which each partner is a well-trained specialist? Improbable. Very few men show enough fore-

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thought to marry women whose own talents and training fit ideally into the complex jigsaw pattern of organization that will be required. Of these, many will already have children and thus be kept at home.

Conceivably one could make up a group of, say, 50 men and 50 women, all suitable for the work to be done, and let them figure out their own sleeping arrangements. But this again is leaving too much to chance. Some of the girls will be more attractive than others, and the results are obvious. Disappointed lovers will have small chance to drown their sorrows, small choice of another dame — and no chance whatsoever to escape the presence of the one they desire and can't have. Eskimos, with their companionable attitude toward wife-lending, would have less difficulty of this kind, but we don't want to wait to explore Mars till our own society has evolved Eskimo mores.

I am told that the Chinese ideogram for "trouble" is made up of the symbols "two women under one roof." And in all events, few women are good explorers; you might say they are too practical. Feminists, pardon me.

Altogether, it seems to me that the early expeditions will just have to forego sex, along with numerous other modern conveniences. The question is whether they will be able to do so and survive, and I think history has already answered it: "Yes."

Before going into detail, I might mention one possibility: some drug which will inhibit the sex drive without doing permanent harm — and also without inhibiting the secondary male characteristics of strength, aggressiveness, and devotion to an abstract ideal. It is these traits which make an all-male expedition to Mars desirable, just as it was for the exploration of Earth.

A drug of the sort I am imagining is not yet known, but recent work with such materials as the Rauwolfia derivatives suggests it might well be developed. Certainly a few pills would cost less to transport and care for than even the nicest of nice girls.

But suppose this is impractical. Could we simply send men out for years at a time?

It has been done.

There is at least one class of perfectly normal men who remain celibate all their lives and nevertheless produce more than their share of outstanding scientists and explorers. I refer, of course, to the Jesuit order. Even on Mars, a camp of Jesuits ought to manage quite well. They've done it in the past under conditions equally grim — see, for instance, the biography of Jacques Marquette. Monks and priests of other orders have also made many contributions.

But laymen have done as well. In their voyages around the world, Magellan and Drake took some three years, with few stops. If the ignorant roisterers who manned the rat-infested ships of those days could

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do it while plagued with scurvy or outright starvation, surely a carefully chosen band of scientists running a taut camp can do better.

We have agreed to Dr. Richardson's argument that ordinary men can't remain celibate under trying circumstances for very long at a time before trouble develops. But that's the catch. We aren't going to send ordinary men to other planets. They will be intellectuals and, to some degree, athletes, looking for the "something hid behind the ranges." Like a strong religious bent, a powerful curiosity will compensate for many deprivations. In choosing the crew, psychological tests will doubtless be used to weed out men who can't stand the gaff; there will be enough who pass, who can undergo austerities and hazards for years at a stretch and count the time well spent. It has often happened in military and naval service — and the Mars expeditions will not be staffed with unhappy draftees.

The classic example is probably that of Fridtjof Nansen, who deliberately froze his ship into the ice off the New Siberian Islands in 1893 and drifted for two years to see where he would be carried. In 1895 he left the ship with one companion for a dash to the North Pole — they almost made it. After wintering in Franz Josef Land, they were picked up by another expedition and carried home. Nansen was a man in every sense of the word, scientist, explorer, athlete, statesman, husband and father. He withstood three womanless years of Arctic conditions and lived to a hearty old age, his later career including several other long voyages. Nor did he ever have trouble with his crews.

It is common experience that strenuous, interesting activity carried on for an extended period fills the mind enough so that a single bed is no great hardship. This would be especially true if there were no women for a good many millions of miles. Out of sight is not quite out of mind, but it helps . . . and the boys will have one glorious luau to look forward to on their return.

Not that the Mars expedition will be any picnic. Quite apart from the danger of the environment and the monotony for the camp, you can't be isolated with a small group of people for very long at a time before they lose their savor. You know exactly what Joe Doakes will say to any remark you make, and if he scratches his nose just once more in that unnecessarily maddening fashion you'll heave a brick at him. Experience on Earth indicates that a two-man expedition beyond Earth would be murder.

But the Mars camp may have fifty or a hundred, all intelligent, educated, probably chosen for compatibility and interesting conversation among other traits. Perhaps the unearthly surroundings and the strain will necessitate having a psychiatrist along, but monotony can be alleviated. The equipment should

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include plenty of microfilmed books of a type liable to start lively arguments.

It may be worthwhile to have one full-time chief of recreation, a genius at inventing new amusements, encouraging hobbies, promoting sports and other activities, and smoothing any ruffled feathers.

Chaplains — who would also have to be engineers or scientists — would help many of the personnel through difficult moments. Herbs, spices, and extracts don't weigh much, and would add enough variety to the meals to reduce one source of friction.

Boredom can be just as intense when sexual outlets are available. And anyway, as Anthony Boucher remarked to me, the idea of incessant sexual activity as a necessity of life is purely cultural, as exaggerated in its fashion as the opposite belief that sex is shameful and ought to be kept to a bare minimum. The man who "can't live without women" is often compensating for an inward doubt of his own masculinity. Kipling has already put the whole theme of this essay into a few lines:

What is a woman that you forsake her,
And the hearth-fire and the home-acre,
To go with the old grey Widow-maker?

Men have done it before, and they will be able to do it again. While biological functions cannot be ignored, they should be seen in proper perspective.

The question of how we will reach Mars in the first place is a tough one; the matter of feminine companionship and other recreation is relatively minor.

All the above, of course, applies only to the exploration phase of interplanetary travel. Genuine, permanent colonies, requiring other human types than the scientists, are a different problem, and perhaps one which cannot be solved in conventional terms. But our descendants will cross that bridge when they come to it.

Thus Mr. Anderson, from as strictly a male viewpoint as Dr. Richardson himself. But most of the objections of correspondents stemmed from a different attitude — an immediate rejection of the basic male-centered assumptions. And, as is perhaps not surprising in such an audience, this rejection came

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as frequently from men as from women. The perfect writer to express this — no, not feminist, but merely human point of view is Miriam Allen deFord, who feels, with tart eloquence, that she has

News for Dr. Richardson

by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

I AM GOING TO TELL DR. ROBERT S. Richardson a secret.

Women are not walking sex organs.

They are human beings. They are people, just like men.

"I feel that the men stationed on a planet," says Dr. Richardson, "should be openly accompanied by women to relieve the sexual tensions that develop among healthy normal males."

I couldn't agree with him more — if he would end that sentence at the word "women." There is not the slightest doubt that the unprecedented conditions that will exist in a scientific "occupation force" on Mars or any other extraterrestrial body will mean some reshuffling and modification of the sex mores (outmoded anyway, and more often neglected than followed — ask Dr. Kinsey) which obtain on earth, or at least in Western society, today.

But what makes Dr. Richardson think that (a) only males undergo sexual tensions, or that (b) the recommended way to "relieve the sexual tensions" of his Martian outpost would be to import a sort of spaceborne bagnio for its members?

To anyone not blinded by subconscious male arrogance, it would occur that the best solution to an indubitable problem would be to approximate, as closely as the situation will admit, the culture in which the advance guard on Mars had been reared from infancy. In other words, that group of scientific and technological workers which will first colonize Mars or any other planet should be selected without any criteria except those of health, adaptability, education, and technical ability, so as to form a community as like as possible to the community from which the colonists came.

I do not take it that Dr. Richardson contemplates practicing discrimination in his Martian personnel as to race, nationality, or political or religious belief. But apparently it has never entered his mind that there should also be no discrimination as to sex.

Is there any reason why women should not be as eligible as men to become part of that personnel?

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It is true that (largely because of the discouragements and obstacles set in their path by people with Dr. Richardson's implicit viewpoint) fewer women than men do turn to the physical sciences as a career. But even so there are plenty of young women, healthy and temperamentally suited to the rigors of extra-terrestrial life, who have been trained as physicists, chemists, astronomers, engineers, and in all the needed professional disciplines, down to multitudes of laboratory and technical assistants. If such an opportunity were offered them as the great adventure Dr. Richardson outlines, numbers of them would be eager to participate in it. (And please let me emphasize that I am not suggesting recruiting women merely for the minor posts; every position from highest to lowest should be open to the best-qualified applicant. The kind of man who would be reluctant to serve under a woman superior is not the kind of man who would be able to undergo the other social frictions of those years of isolation.)

Physically, indeed, women would be better suited than men as Martian pioneers. As Dr. Ashley Montagu and others have abundantly proved, they have greater endurance, more latent strength, more resistance to disease. To quote Montagu, "The fact is that the female is constitutionally stronger than the male and only muscularly less powerful; she has greater stamina and lives longer." Muscular superiority will not be one of the desiderata on Mars, where gravity is light and, besides, machines will do all the heavy work.

The notion that women are inherently more emotional and excitable than men is a hoary myth that belongs back in the days of 18th century "vapors" and Victorian swoonings. Actually, the convention that induces men to repress every indication of emotion makes neurosis more prevalent among them than among women.

The other moss-grown legend that women don't get on with other women, can't cooperate for the common good, has been exploded long ago except in the minds of a few unrealistic wishful thinkers. It is true only of women — and men — who have nothing better to occupy their time and energy than personalities, not of working, useful persons of either sex. I can assure you, incidentally, that there is much less bickering and backhand knifing in conventions of feminine organizations than in those of masculine: I know; I've reported plenty of both.

Women associate on a basis of equality with men in college classes, in business, on juries, on conducted tours, on committees, in voting booths: why not in the personnel of the first Martian expedition?

Moreover, opening the Martian working lists to women as well as to men will mean that not all those sent to Mars will have to be unmarried; like tends to like, and many

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couples with the same or similar professional qualifications can be sent together. Whether any children should be born on Mars of these married couples on the staff is another question, to be decided by the planners; probably strict birth control would have to be enforced. But this is a separate problem irrelevant to the argument — and in any case would arise just as much with respect to that superbrothel Dr. Richardson envisions.

Undoubtedly, however, the vast majority of the colonists, both men and women, *will* be unmarried. Previous marriage, to a person not also selected for the group, would have to constitute a bar to inclusion in the personnel, for one could hardly ask a wife (or husband) to wait alone on earth for so long. But with a bisexual instead of a monosexual staff of pioneer observers, investigators, and technicians, nature would inevitably take its course among the unmarried colonists — just as it does in any mixed group on this planet. To be sure, as I said above, there would still have to be some modification of our conventional sex customs; couples united under the unique conditions of the Martian project might or might not wish to continue their association when they returned to earth.

I can anticipate Dr. Richardson's first reaction to this substitute for his plan. "Think of the rivalries, the jealousies, the enmities, the perpetual turmoil, the feuds and hatreds and killings," he will say. "Science will be forgotten while men battle over women and women over men."

But why? Right here on Terra we have nothing but mixed groups of men and women, in every community. And of course we do have rivalries and jealousies and all the rest, right down to suicide and murder.

But that isn't the normal or usual course of affairs. Most people manage to go through their lives without such upsetting experiences. And this will be a group deliberately winnowed for temperamental stability, and with its primary interest in intellectual pursuits. Among the several hundred on Mars, there will be lots of room for sexual selection. Perhaps there *will* be some of the pioneers, both men and women, who will never find a sexual partner, or will lose the one they found. (There will also be some who prefer celibacy or who are simply not concerned with life outside their work.) But so there are here on earth; and both society and the people affected survive. Life does not give all its most precious gifts to everybody, and the deprived, if they are healthy beings, usually live through their deprivations without serious damage to their psyches.

Besides, what would prevent similar tensions and disturbances between Dr. Richardson's young men and the "nice girls" shipped in to console them — whether each girl

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is to be allotted to a selected man, or the entire group is to serve the community indiscriminately (a point Dr. Richardson doesn't make plain)? H. Chandler Davis has summed it up succinctly: "Men do fight over women, but I deny that they fight nastier over women who are respected."

Of course I can think of one reason why Dr. Richardson would prefer the "nice girls" to a bisexual working force. Presumably the concubines would be chosen, among other attributes, for charm and beauty; and there is no guarantee that because a woman is young, healthy, temperamentally suitable, and a darned good physicist or engineer she will also be pretty — whatever the standard of prettiness may be by the time we get to Mars. But if only pretty girls ever got married or had love affairs, this would be a 75% celibate culture right here and now!

It is pretty disheartening, after all these years, to discover how many otherwise enlightened and progressive-minded men still retain in their subconscious this throwback attitude toward half of humanity, which relegates women to the position of possessions, of ancillary adjuncts to men — what Simone de Beauvoir calls "the second sex": creatures who, in David Graham Phillips' sarcastic phrase, are formed only "to minister satisfyingly to the physical and sentimental needs of men."

To quote Mr. Davis again, in Dr. Richardson's prospectus "the men are to go to Mars to do science and the women are to go there to be used by the men." There is implied in the very blandness of such a proposal a deep-rooted contempt for women which may shock its possessor when it is brought out into the open.

Some 30-odd years ago Mathilde and Mathias Vaerting wrote a book called *The Dominant Sex*. They posited a sort of pendulum-swing throughout history between patriarchal and matriarchal systems, and their thesis was that most of the so-called masculine mental and emotional characteristics are really those of the dominant sex, whichever it may be at the time, most of the so-called feminine those of the subordinate sex. What they advocated was stopping the pendulum at the middle of its swing, thus achieving a culture based on sexual equality and partnership.

More recent research has invalidated a good deal of their evidential historical material, but the general thesis still holds. We in the Western world today are gradually emerging from a long period of male-centered civilization, and approaching what the Vaertings would have considered the middle of the pendulum swing. There are even signs, especially in this country (*e.g.*, Momism), that we are beginning to tend toward a female-centered culture instead. Both extremes are equally undesirable. The times of greatest advance in human progress are those

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when neither sex is subservient to the other.

Dr. Richardson thinks "space travel may force us to adopt a more realistic attitude toward sex than that which prevails at present." Granted and amen. But then he goes on to propose an expedient which he himself acknowledges is taken from the mores of a savage tribe. The people who form the first Martian expedition are hardly likely to be Masai. But neither will they be people from the New Stone Age or the Feudal Period or from any other primitive era. They will be people born and bred in the 20th century (or the 21st), with all that that implies.

The completely naïve assumptions in Dr. Richardson's article are a holdover from those centuries when man was the sun and woman the planet revolving about him; when profound contempt for women was masked in "chivalry," when women were called "the sex," and a woman's sole functions in life were to stand in the background and feed and serve and solace and satisfy her man, to cheer and encourage and admire slavishly the master who owned her and provided her with economic support, and to produce sons to carry on the tradition and — unavoidably and not too acceptably — daughters to serve similarly the sons of other women.

Unfortunately, heredity does not work that way. Every women inherits her father's genes as well as her mother's, just as every man inherits his mother's genes as well as his father's. So eventually the pendulum swings. Mankind is one of the many species in which there is a minimum distinction between the sexes, outside of the obvious sexual characteristics. Human beings are neither angler fish, in which the tiny male is a parasite on the female, nor birds of paradise, in which the dull little female scarcely seems of the same genus as her gorgeous mate. They are closest to those many animals which feed, forage, hunt, and carry on all the non-sexual as well as the sexual activities of life together, on an equal footing.

There is one very simple way to test the deepest convictions of anyone on any subject — not the convictions he thinks he holds, but those buried where only a psychoanalyst could uncover them. That is to turn his theses inside out, and let him look at them then.

Let us suppose that Dr. Richardson's proposals were reversed. Let us suppose that he had suggested that several hundred young women scientists be sent to Mars, and that "to relieve their sexual tensions" shiploads of "nice boys" be sent to serve them.

The mere thought of such a reversal would undoubtedly horrify him.

Well, that's the way both women and men emancipated from his atavistic prejudices feel about his extraterrestrial bordello.

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Richard Matheson has climbed a long way since his first story appeared here almost six years ago. He is now working on the screen play of his as yet unpublished novel THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN, *which is scheduled to be that rarity, a Class A science fiction film; and he will soon leave Hollywood (which can offer few attractions to a man so enviably married) to be the guest of honor at the Ninth Annual West Coast Science Fiction Conference in Oakland, California. (Aside to our West Coast readers: If you'd like to attend this highly promising Westercon on June 30 and July 1, please send $1 for registration and full information to Mrs. Marilyn Tulley, 432 23d Ave., Oakland 6.) One of his last magazine stories to be written before the Hollywood hiatus is this tale of strength and endurance, robotic and human — a science fiction sports story so realistic, simple and powerful that it should prove moving even to sports-loathing readers who have never let a boxing bout darken their television screens.*

Steel

by RICHARD MATHESON

THE TWO MEN CAME OUT OF THE station rolling a covered object. They rolled it along the platform until they reached the middle of the train, then grunted as they lifted it up the steps, the sweat running down their bodies. One of its wheels fell off and bounced down the metal steps and a man coming up behind them picked it up and handed it to the man who was wearing a rumpled brown suit.

"Thanks," said the man in the brown suit and he put the wheel in his side coat pocket.

Inside the car, the men pushed the covered object down the aisle. With one of its wheels off, it was lop-sided and the man in the brown suit — his name was Kelly — had to keep his shoulder braced against it to keep it from toppling over. He breathed heavily and licked away tiny balls of sweat that kept forming over his upper lip.

When they reached the middle of the car, the man in the wrinkled blue suit pushed forward one of the seat backs so there were four seats, two facing two. Then the two men pushed the covered object between the seats and Kelly reached through

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a slit in the covering and felt around until he found the right button.

The covered object sat down heavily on a seat by the window.

"Oh, God, listen to'm squeak," said Kelly.

The other man, Pole, shrugged and sat down with a sigh.

"What d'ya expect?" he asked.

Kelly was pulling off his suit coat. He dropped it down on the opposite seat and sat down beside the covered object.

"Well, we'll get 'im some o' that stuff soon's we're paid off," he said, worriedly.

"If we can find some," said Pole who was almost as thin as one. He sat slumped back against the hot seat watching Kelly mop at his sweaty cheeks.

"Why shouldn't we?" asked Kelly, pushing the damp handkerchief down under his shirt collar.

"Because they don't make it no more," Pole said with the false patience of a man who has had to say the same thing too many times.

"Well, that's crazy," said Kelly. He pulled off his hat and patted at the bald-spot in the center of his rust-colored hair. "There's still plenty B-twos in the business."

"Not many," said Pole, bracing one foot upon the covered object.

"*Don't*," said Kelly.

Pole let his foot drop heavily and a curse fell slowly from his lips. Kelly ran the handkerchief around the lining of his hat. He started to put the hat on again, then changed his mind and dropped it on top of his coat.

"Christ, it's hot," he said.

"It'll get hotter," said Pole.

Across the aisle a man put his suitcase up on the rack, took off his suit coat and sat down, puffing. Kelly looked at him, then turned back.

"Ya think it'll be hotter in Maynard, huh?" he asked.

Pole nodded. Kelly swallowed dryly.

"Wish we could have another o' them beers," he said.

Pole stared out the window at the heat waves rising from the concrete platform.

"I had three beers," said Kelly, "and I'm just as thirsty as I was when I started."

"Yeah," said Pole.

"Might as well've not had a beer since Philly," said Kelly.

Pole said, "Yeah."

Kelly sat there staring at Pole a moment. Pole had dark hair and white skin and his hands were the hands of a man who should be bigger than Pole was. But the hands were as clever as they were big. Pole's one o' the best, Kelly thought, one o' the best.

"Ya think he'll be all right?" he asked.

Pole grunted and smiled for an instant without being amused.

"If he don't get hit," he said.

"No, no, I mean it," said Kelly.

Pole's dark, lifeless eyes left the station and shifted over to Kelly.

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"So do I," he said.

"Come *on*," Kelly said.

"Steel," said Pole, "ya know just as well as me. He's shot t'hell."

"That ain't true," said Kelly, shifting uncomfortably. "All he needs is a little work. A little overhaul 'n' he'll be good as new."

"Yeah, a little three-four grand overhaul," Pole said, "with parts they don't make no more." He looked out the window again.

"Oh . . . it ain't as bad as that," said Kelly. "Jesus, the way you talk you'd think he was ready for scrap."

"Ain't he?" Pole asked.

"No," said Kelly angrily, "he *ain't*."

Pole shrugged and his long white fingers rose and fell in his lap.

"Just cause he's a little old," said Kelly.

"Old." Pole grunted. "*Ancient*."

"Oh . . ." Kelly took a deep breath of the hot air in the car and blew it out through his broad nose. He looked at the covered object like a father who was angry with his son's faults but angrier with those who mentioned the faults of his son.

"Plenty o' fight left in him," he said.

Pole watched the people walking on the platform. He watched a porter pushing a wagon full of piled suitcases.

"Well . . . is he okay?" Kelly asked finally as if he hated to ask.

Pole looked over at him.

"I dunno, Steel," he said. "He needs work. Ya know that. The trigger spring in his left arm's been rewired so many damn times it's almost shot. He's got no protection on that side. The left side of his face's all beat in, the eye lens is cracked. The leg cables is worn, they're pulled slack, the tension's gone to hell. Christ, even his gyro's off."

Pole looked out at the platform again with a disgusted hiss.

"Not to mention the oil paste he ain't got in 'im," he said.

"We'll get 'im some," Kelly said.

"Yeah, *after* the fight, *after* the fight!" Pole snapped, "What about *before* the fight? He'll be creakin' around that ring like a goddam — *steam shovel*. It'll be a miracle if he goes two rounds. They'll prob'ly ride us outta town on a pole."

Kelly swallowed. "I don't think it's that bad," he said.

"The *hell* it ain't," said Pole. "It's worse. Wait'll that crowd gets a load of 'Battling Maxo' from Philadelphia. Oh — *Christ*, they'll blow a nut. We'll be lucky if we get our five hundred bucks."

"Well, the contract's signed," said Kelly firmly. "They can't back out now. I got a copy right in the old pocket." He leaned over and patted at his coat.

"That contract's for Battling Maxo," said Pole. "Not for this — steam shovel here."

"Maxo's gonna do all right," said Kelly as if he was trying hard to believe it. "He's not as bad off as you say."

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"Against a B-*seven*?" Pole asked.

"It's just a *starter* B-*seven*," said Kelly. "It ain't got the kinks out yet."

Pole turned away.

"Battling Maxo," he said. "One-round Maxo. The battling steam shovel."

"Aw, shut the hell up!" Kelly snapped suddenly, getting redder. "You're always knockin' 'im down. Well, he's been doin' OK for twelve years now and he'll keep on doin' OK. So he needs some oil paste. And he needs a little work. *So what?* With five hundred bucks we can get him all the paste he needs. And a new trigger spring for his arm and — and new leg cables! And everything. Chris-*sake*."

He fell back against the seat, chest shuddering with breath and rubbed at his cheeks with his wet handkerchief. He looked aside at Maxo. Abruptly, he reached over a hand and patted Maxo's covered knee clumsily and the steel clanked hollowly under his touch.

"You're doin' all right," said Kelly to his fighter.

The train was moving across a sun-baked prairie. All the windows were open but the wind that blew in was like blasts from an oven.

Kelly sat reading his paper, his shirt sticking wetly to his broad chest. Pole had taken his coat off too and was staring morosely out the window at the grass-tufted prairie that went as far as he could see. Maxo sat under his covering, his heavy steel frame rocking a little with the motion of the train.

Kelly put down his paper.

"Not even a word," he said.

"What d'ya expect?" Pole asked. "They don't cover Maynard."

"Maxo ain't just some clunk from Maynard," said Kelly. "He was big time. Ya'd think they'd" — he shrugged — "remember him."

"Why? For a coupla prelims in the Garden three years ago?" Pole asked.

"It wasn't no three years, buddy," said Kelly definitely.

"It was in 1977," said Pole, "and now it's 1980. That's three years where I come from."

"It was late '77," said Kelly. "Right before Christmas. Don't ya remember? Just before — Marge and me . . ."

Kelly didn't finish. He stared down at the paper as if Marge's picture were on it — the way she looked the day she left him.

"What's the difference?" Pole asked, "They don't remember *them* for Chrissake. With a coupla thousand o' the damn things floatin' around? How could they remember 'em? About the only ones who get space are the champeens and the new models."

Pole looked at Maxo. "I hear Mawling's puttin' out a B-nine this year," he said.

Kelly refocused his eyes. "Yeah?" he said uninterestedly.

"Hyper-triggers in both arms —

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and legs. All steeled aluminum. Triple gyro. Triple-twisted wiring. God, they'll be beautiful."

Kelly put down the paper.

"Think they'd remember him," he muttered. "It wasn't so long ago."

His face relaxed in a smile of recollection.

"Boy, will I ever forget that night," he said. "No one gives us a tumble. It was all Dimsy the Rock, Dimsy the Rock. *Three* t'one for Dimsy the Rock. Dimsy the Rock — fourth rankin' light heavy. On his way t'the top."

He chuckled deep in his chest. "And did we ever put him away," he said. "*Oooh.*" He grunted with savage pleasure. "I can see that left cross now. *Bang!* Right in the chops. And old Dimsy the Rock hittin' the canvas like a — like a *rock*, yeah, *just* like a rock!"

He laughed happily. "Boy, what a night, what a night," he said. "Will I ever forget that night?"

Pole looked at Kelly with a somber face. Then he turned away and stared at the dusty sun-baked plain again.

"I wonder," he muttered.

Kelly saw the man across the aisle looking again at the covered Maxo. He caught the man's eye and smiled, then gestured with his head toward Maxo.

"That's my fighter," he said, loudly.

The man smiled politely, cupping a hand behind one ear.

"My fighter," said Kelly. "Battling Maxo. Ever hear of 'im?"

The man stared at Kelly a moment before shaking his head.

Kelly smiled. "Yeah, he was almost light heavyweight champ once," he told the man. The man nodded politely.

On an impulse, Kelly got up and stepped across the aisle. He reversed the seatback in front of the man and sat down facing him.

"Pretty damn hot," he said.

The man smiled. "Yes. Yes it is," he said.

"No new trains out here yet, huh?"

"No," said the man. "Not yet."

"Got all the new ones back in Philly," said Kelly. "That's where" — he gestured with his head — "my friend 'n' I come from. And Maxo."

Kelly stuck out his hand.

"The name's Kelly," he said. "Tim Kelly."

The man looked surprised. His grip was loose.

"Maxwell," he said.

When he drew back his hand he rubbed it unobtrusively on his pants leg.

"I used t'be called 'Steel' Kelly," said Kelly. "Used t'be in the business m'self. Before the war o' course. I was a light heavy."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. That's right. Called me 'Steel' cause I never got knocked down once. Not *once*. I was even number nine in the ranks once. Yeah."

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"I see." The man waited patiently.

"My — fighter," said Kelly, gesturing toward Maxo with his head again. "He's a light heavy too. We're fightin' in Maynard t'night. You goin' that far?"

"Uh — no," said the man. "No, I'm — getting off at Hayes."

"Oh." Kelly nodded. "Too bad. Gonna be a good scrap." He let out a heavy breath. "Yeah, he was — fourth in the ranks once. He'll be *back* too. He — uh — knocked down Dimsy the Rock in late '77. Maybe ya read about that."

"I don't believe . . ."

"Oh. Uh-huh. Kelly nodded. "Well . . . it was in all the East Coast papers. You know. New York, Boston, Philly. Yeah it — got a hell of a spread. Biggest upset o' the year."

He scratched at his bald spot.

"He's a B-two y'know but — that means he's the second model Mawling put out," he explained, seeing the look on the man's face. "That was back in — let's see — '67, I think it was. Yeah, '67."

He made a smacking sound with his lips. "Yeah, that was a good model," he said. "The best. Maxo's still goin' strong." He shrugged depreciatingly. "I don't go for these new ones," he said. "You know. The ones made o' steeled aluminum with all the doo-dads."

The man stared at Kelly blankly.

"Too — . . . flashy — flimsy. Nothin' . . ." Kelly bunched his big fist in front of his chest and made a face. "Nothin' *solid*," he said. "No. Mawling don't make 'em like Maxo no more."

"I see," said the man.

Kelly smiled.

"Yeah," he said. "Used t'be in the game m'self. When there was enough men, o' course. Before the bans." He shook his head, then smiled quickly. "Well," he said, "we'll take this B-seven. Don't even know what his name is," he said, laughing.

His face sobered for an instant and he swallowed.

"We'll take 'im," he said.

Later on, when the man had gotten off the train, Kelly went back to his seat. He put his feet up on the opposite seat and, lying back his head, he covered his face with the newspaper.

"Get a little shut-eye," he said.

Pole grunted.

Kelly sat slouched back, staring at the newspaper next to his eyes. He felt Maxo bumping against his side a little. He listened to the squeaking of Maxo's joints. "Be all right," he muttered to himself.

"What?" Pole asked.

Kelly swallowed. "I didn't say anything," he said.

When they got off the train at six o'clock that evening they pushed Maxo around the station and onto the sidewalk. Across the street from them a man sitting in his taxi called them.

"We got no taxi money," said Pole.

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"We can't just push 'im through the streets," Kelly said. "Besides, we don't even know where Kruger Stadium is."

"What are we supposed to eat with then?"

"We'll be loaded after the fight," said Kelly. "I'll buy you a steak three inches thick."

Sighing, Pole helped Kelly push the heavy Maxo across the street that was still so hot they could feel it through their shoes. Kelly started sweating right away and licking at his upper lip.

"God, how d'they live out here?" he asked.

When they were putting Maxo inside the cab the base wheel came out again and Pole, with a snarl, kicked it away.

"What're ya *doin?*" Kelly asked.

"Oh . . . sh—" Pole got into the taxi and slumped back against the warm leather of the seat while Kelly hurried over the soft tar pavement and picked up the wheel.

"Chris-*sake*," Kelly muttered as he got in the cab. "What's the—?"

"Where to, chief?" the driver asked.

"Kruger Stadium," Kelly said.

"You're there." The cab driver pushed in the rotor button and the car glided away from the curb.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Kelly asked Pole in a low voice. "We wait more'n half a damn year t'get us a bout and you been nothin' but bellyaches from the start."

"Some bout," said Pole. "Maynard, Kansas—the prizefightin' center o' the nation."

"It's a start, ain't it?" Kelly said. "It'll keep us in coffee 'n' cakes a while, won't it? It'll put Maxo back in shape. And if we take it, it could lead to—"

Pole glanced over disgustedly.

"I don't *get* you," Kelly said quietly. "He's our fighter. What're ya writin' 'im off for? Don't ya want 'im t'win?"

"I'm a class-A mechanic, Steel," Pole said in his falsely patient voice. "I'm not a day-dreamin' kid. We got a piece o' dead iron here, not a B-seven. It's simple mechanics, Steel, that's all. Maxo'll be lucky if he comes out o' that ring with his head still on."

Kelly turned away angrily.

"It's a *starter* B-seven," he muttered. "Full o' kinks. *Full* of 'em."

"Sure, sure," said Pole.

They sat silently a while looking out the window, Maxo between them, the broad steel shoulders bumping against theirs. Kelly stared at the buildings, his hands clenching and unclenching in his lap as if he was getting ready to go fifteen rounds.

"That a B-fighter ya got there?" the driver asked over his shoulder.

Kelly started and looked forward. He managed a smile.

"That's right," he said.

"Fightin' t'night?"

"Yeah. Battling Maxo. Maybe ya heard of 'im."

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"Nope."

"He was almost light heavyweight champ once," said Kelly.

"That right?"

"Yes sir. Ya heard o' Dimsy the Rock, ain't ya?"

"Don't think so."

"Well, Dimsy the —"

Kelly stopped and glanced over at Pole who was shifting irritably on the seat.

"Dimsy the Rock was number *three* in the light heavy ranks. Right on his way t'the top they all said. Well, my boy put 'im away in the fourth round. Left-crossed 'im — *bang!* Almost put Dimsy through the ropes. It was beautiful."

"That right?" asked the driver.

"Yes sir. You get a chance, stop by t'night at the Stadium. You'll see a good fight."

"Have you seen this Maynard Flash?" Pole asked the driver suddenly.

"The Flash? You bet. Man, there's a fighter on his way. Won seven straight. He'll be up there soon ya can bet ya life. Matter o' fact he's fightin' t'night too. With some B-two heap from back East I hear."

The driver snickered. "Flash'll slaughter 'im," he said.

Kelly stared at the back of the driver's head, the skin tight across his cheek bones.

"Yeah?" he said, flatly.

"Man, he'll —"

The driver broke off suddenly and looked back. "Hey, you ain't —" he started, then turned front again. "Hey, I didn't know, mister," he said. "I was only ribbin'."

"Skip it," Pole said, "You're right."

Kelly's head snapped around and he glared at the sallow-faced Pole.

"*Shut up*," he said in a low voice.

He fell back against the seat and stared out the window, his face hard.

"I'm gonna get 'im some oil paste," he said after they'd ridden a block.

"Swell," said Pole, "We'll eat the tools."

"Go to hell," said Kelly.

The cab pulled up in front of the brick-fronted stadium and they lifted Maxo out onto the sidewalk. While Pole tilted him, Kelly squatted down and slid the base wheel back into its slot. Then Kelly paid the driver the exact fare and they started pushing Maxo toward the alley.

"Look," said Kelly, nodding toward the poster board in front of the stadium. The third fight listed was

MAYNARD FLASH
(B–7, L.H.)
vs.
BATTLING MAXO
(B–2, L.H.)

"Big deal," said Pole.

Kelly's smile disappeared. He started to say something, then pressed his lips together. He shook

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his head irritably and big drops of his sweat fell to the sidewalk.

Maxo creaked as they pushed him down the alley and carried him up the steps to the door. The base wheel fell out again and bounced down the cement steps. Neither one of them said anything.

It was hotter inside. The air didn't move.

"Refreshing like a closet," Pole said.

"Get the wheel," Kelly said and started down the narrow hallway leaving Pole with Maxo. Pole leaned Maxo against the wall and turned for the door.

Kelly came to a half-glassed office door and knocked.

"Yeah," said a voice inside. Kelly went in, taking off his hat.

The fat bald man looked up from his desk. His skull glistened with sweat.

"I'm Battling Maxo's owner," said Kelly, smiling. He extended his big hand but the man ignored it.

"Was wonderin' if you'd make it," said the man whose name was Mr. Waddow. "Your fighter in decent shape?"

"The best," said Kelly cheerfully. "The best. My mechanic — he's class-A — just took 'im apart and put 'im together again before we left Philly."

The man looked unconvinced.

"He's in good shape," said Kelly.

"You're lucky t'get a bout with a B-two," said Mr. Waddow. "We ain't used nothin' less than B-fours for more than two years now. The fighter we was after got stuck in a car wreck though and got ruined."

Kelly nodded. "Well, ya got nothin' t'worry about," he said. "My fighter's in top shape. He's the one knocked down Dimsy the Rock in Madison Square year or so ago."

"I want a good fight," said the fat man.

"You'll get a good fight," Kelly said, feeling a tight pain in his stomach muscles. "Maxo's in good shape. You'll see. He's in top shape."

"I just want a good fight."

Kelly stared at the fat man a moment. Then he said, "You got a ready room we can use? The mechanic 'n' me'd like t'get something t'eat."

"Third door down the hall on the right side," said Mr. Waddow. "Your bout's at eight thirty."

Kelly nodded. "OK."

"Be there," said Mr. Waddow turning back to his work.

"Uh . . . what about —?" Kelly started.

"You get ya money after ya deliver a fight," Mr. Waddow cut him off.

Kelly's smile faltered.

"Okay," he said. "See ya then."

When Mr. Waddow didn't answer, he turned for the door.

"Don't slam the door," Mr. Waddow said. Kelly didn't.

"Come on," he said to Pole when he was in the hall again. They pushed Maxo down to the ready room and put him inside it.

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"What about checkin' 'im over?" Kelly said.

"What about my *gut?*" snapped Pole. "I ain't eaten in six hours."

Kelly blew out a heavy breath. "All right, let's go then," he said.

They put Maxo in a corner of the room.

"We should be able t'lock him in," Kelly said.

"Why? Ya think somebody's gonna *steal* 'im?"

"He's valuable," said Kelly.

"Sure, he's a priceless antique," said Pole.

Kelly closed the door three times before the latch caught. He turned away from it, shaking his head worriedly. As they started down the hall he looked at his wrist and saw for the fiftieth time the white band where his pawned watch had been.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Six twenty-five," said Pole.

"We'll have t'make it fast," Kelly said. "I want ya t'check 'im over good before the fight."

"What for?" asked Pole.

"Did ya *hear* me?" Kelly said angrily.

"Sure, sure," Pole said.

"He's gonna take that son-of-a-bitch B-seven," Kelly said, barely opening his lips.

"Sure he is," said Pole. "With his teeth."

"Hurry up," Kelly said, ignoring him. "We ain't got all night. Did ya get the wheel?"

Pole handed it to him.

"Some town," Kelly said disgustedly as they came back in the side door of the stadium.

"I told ya they wouldn't have any oil paste here," Pole said. "Why should they? B-twos are dead. Maxo's probably the only one in a thousand miles."

Kelly walked quickly down the hall, opened the door of the ready room and went in. He crossed over to Maxo and pulled off the covering.

"Get to it," he said. "There ain't much time."

Blowing out a slow, tired breath, Pole took off his wrinkled blue coat and tossed it over the bench standing against the wall. He dragged a small table over to where Maxo was, then rolled up his sleeves. Kelly took off his hat and coat and watched while Pole worked loose the nut that held the tool cavity door shut. He stood with his big hands on his hips while Pole drew out the tools one by one and laid them down on the table.

"Rust," Pole muttered. He rubbed a finger around the inside of the cavity and held it up, copper colored rust flaking off the tip.

"Come on," Kelly said, irritably. He sat down on the bench and watched as Pole pried off the sectional plates on Maxo's chest. His eyes ran up over Maxo's leonine head. If I didn't see them coils, he thought once more, I'd swear he was real. Only the mechanics in a B-fighter could tell it wasn't real men in there. Sometimes people were actually fooled and sent in letters

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complaining that real men were being used. Even from ringside the flesh tones looked human. Mawling had a special patent on that.

Kelly's face relaxed as he smiled fondly at Maxo.

"Good boy," he murmured. Pole didn't hear. Kelly watched the sure-handed mechanic probe with his electric pick, examining connections and potency centers.

"Is he all right?" he asked, without thinking.

"Sure, he's great," Pole said. He plucked out a tiny steel-caged tube. "If this doesn't blow out," he said.

"Why should it?"

"It's sub-par," Pole said jadedly. "I told ya that after the last fight *eight months* ago."

Kelly swallowed. "We'll get 'im a new one after this bout," he said.

"Seventy-five bucks," muttered Pole as if he were watching the money fly away on green wings.

"It'll hold," Kelly said, more to himself than to Pole.

Pole shrugged. He put back the tube and pressed in the row of buttons on the main autonomic board. Maxo stirred.

"Take it easy on the left arm," said Kelly. "Save it."

"If it don't work here, it won't work out there," said Pole.

He jabbed at a button and Maxo's left arm began moving with little, circling motions. Pole pushed over the safety-block switch that would keep Maxo from counterpunching and stepped back. He threw a right at Maxo's chin and the robot's arm jumped up with a hitching motion to cover his face. Maxo's left eye flickered like a ruby catching the sun.

"If that eye cell goes . . ." Pole said.

"It *won't*," said Kelly tensely. He watched Pole throw another punch at the left side of Maxo's head. He saw the tiny ripple of the flexo-covered cheek, then the arm jerked up again. It squeaked.

"That's enough," he said. "It works. Try the rest of 'im."

"He's gonna get more than two punches throwed at his head," Pole said.

"*His arm's all right*," Kelly said. "Try something else I said."

Pole reached inside Maxo and activated the leg cable centers. Maxo began shifting around. He lifted his left leg and shook off the base wheel automatically. Then he was standing lightly on his black-shoed feet, feeling at the floor like a cured cripple testing for stance.

Pole reached forward and jabbed in the FULL button, then jumped back as Maxo's eye beams centered on him and the robot moved forward, broad shoulders rocking slowly, arms up defensively.

"Christ," Pole muttered, "they'll hear 'im squeakin' in the back row."

Kelly grimaced, teeth set. He watched Pole throw another right and Maxo's arm lurch up raggedly. His throat moved with a convulsive swallow and he seemed to have

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trouble breathing the close air in the little room.

Pole shifted around the floor quickly, side to side. Maxo followed lumberingly, changing direction with visibly jerking motions.

"Oh, he's *beautiful*," Pole said, stopping. "Just beautiful." Maxo came up, arms still raised, and Pole jabbed in under them, pushing the OFF button. Maxo stopped.

"Look, we'll have t'put 'im on *de*fense, Steel," Pole said, "That's all there is to it. He'll get chopped t'pieces if we have 'im movin' in."

Kelly cleared his throat. "No," he said.

"Oh for — will ya use ya *head*?" snapped Pole. "He's a B-two f'Chrissake. He's gonna get slaughtered anyway. Let's save the pieces."

"They want 'im on the *off*ense," said Kelly, "It's in the contract."

Pole turned away with a hiss.

"What's the use?" he muttered.

"Test 'im some more."

"What for? He's as good as he'll ever be."

"Will ya do what I say!" Kelly shouted, all the tension exploding out of him.

Pole turned back and jabbed in a button. Maxo's left arm shot out. There was a snapping noise inside it and it fell against Maxo's side with a dead clank.

Kelly started up, his face stricken. "Jesus, what did ya *do!*" he cried. He ran over to where Pole was pushing the button again. Maxo's arm didn't move.

"I *told* ya not t'fool with that arm!" Kelly yelled. "What the hell's the *matter* with ya!" His voice cracked in the middle of the sentence.

Pole didn't answer. He picked up his pry and began working off the left shoulder plate.

"So help me God, if you broke that arm . . ." Kelly warned in a low, snaking voice.

"If *I* broke it!" Pole snapped. "Listen, you dumb mick! This heap has been runnin' on borrowed time for three years now! Don't talk t'me about breakages!"

Kelly clenched his teeth, his eyes small and deadly.

"Open it up," he said.

"Son-of-a —" Pole muttered as he got the plate off, "You find another goddam mechanic that coulda kep' this steam shovel together any better these last years. You just *find* one."

Kelly didn't answer. He stood rigidly, watching while Pole put down the curved plate and looked inside.

When Pole touched it, the trigger spring broke in half and part of it jumped across the room.

Kelly stared at the shoulder pit with horrified eyes.

"Oh, Christ," he said in a shaking voice. "Oh, *Christ*."

Pole started to say something, then stopped. He looked at the ashen-faced Kelly without moving.

Kelly's eyes moved to Pole.

"Fix it," he said, hoarsely.

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Pole swallowed. "Steel, I—"

"*Fix* it!"

"I can't!" That spring's been fixin' t'break for—"

"You broke it! Now *fix* it!" Kelly clamped rigid fingers on Pole's arm. Pole jerked back.

"Let go of me!" he said.

"What's the matter with you!" Kelly cried. "Are you crazy? He's got t'be fixed. He's *got* t'be!"

"Steel, he needs a new spring."

"Well, *get* it!"

"They don't *have* 'em here, Steel," Pole said. "I *told* ya. And if they *did* have 'em, we ain't got the sixteen fifty t'get one."

"Oh—Oh, *Jesus*," said Kelly. His hand fell away and he stumbled to the other side of the room. He sank down on the bench and stared without blinking at the tall motionless Maxo.

He sat there a long time, just staring, while Pole stood watching him, the pry still in his hand. He saw Kelly's broad chest rise and fall with spasmodic movements. Kelly's face was a blank.

"If he don't watch 'em," muttered Kelly, finally.

"What?"

Kelly looked up, his mouth set in a straight, hard line. "If he don't watch, it'll work," he said.

"What're ya talkin' about?"

Kelly stood up and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"What're ya—"

Pole stopped dead, his mouth falling open. "Are you *crazy?*" he asked.

Kelly kept unbuttoning his shirt. He pulled it off and tossed it on the bench.

"Steel, you're out o' your mind!" Pole said. "You can't do that!"

Kelly didn't say anything.

"But you'll—Steel, you're *crazy!*"

"We deliver a fight or we don't get paid," Kelly said.

"But—Jesus, you'll get *killed!*"

Kelly pulled off his undershirt. His chest was beefy, there was red hair swirled around it. "Have to shave this off," he said.

"Steel, *come on*," Pole said. "You—"

His eyes widened as Kelly sat down on the bench and started unlacing his shoes.

"They'll never let ya," Pole said. "You can't make 'em think you're a—" He stopped and took a jerky step forward. "Steel, fuh Chrissake!"

Kelly looked up at Pole with dead eyes.

"You'll help me," he said.

"But they—"

"Nobody knows what Maxo looks like," Kelly said. "And only Waddow saw me. If he don't watch the bouts we'll be all right."

"But—"

"They won't know," Kelly said. "The B's bleed and bruise too."

"Steel, *come on*," Pole said shakily. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. He sat down hurriedly beside the broad-shouldered Irishman.

"Look," he said. "I got a sister

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back East — in Maryland. If I wire 'er, she'll send us the dough t'get back."

Kelly got up and unbuckled his belt.

"Steel, I know a guy in Philly with a B-five he wants t'sell cheap," Pole said desperately. "We could scurry up the cash and — Steel, fuh Chrissake, you'll get *killed!* It's a B-seven! Don't ya understand? A B-*seven!* You'll be mangled!"

Kelly was working the dark trunks over Maxo's hips.

"I won't let ya do it, Steel," Pole said. "I'll go to —"

He broke off with a sucked-in gasp as Kelly whirled and moved over quickly to haul him to his feet. Kelly's grip was like the jaws of a trap and there was nothing left of him in his eyes.

"You'll help me," Kelly said in a low, trembling voice. "You'll help me or I'll beat ya brains out on the wall."

"You'll get killed," Pole murmured.

"Then I will," said Kelly.

Mr. Waddow came out of his office as Pole was walking the covered Kelly toward the ring.

"Come on, come on," Mr. Waddow said. "They're waitin' on ya."

Pole nodded jerkily and guided Kelly down the hall.

"Where's the owner?" Mr. Waddow called after them.

Pole swallowed quickly. "In the audience," he said.

Mr. Waddow grunted and, as they walked on, Pole heard the door to the office close. Breath emptied from him.

"I should've told 'im," he muttered.

"I'd o' killed ya," Kelly said, his voice muffled under the covering.

Crowd sounds leaked back into the hall now as they turned a corner. Under the canvas covering, Kelly felt a drop of sweat trickle down his temple.

"Listen," he said, "you'll have t'towel me off between rounds."

"Between what rounds?" Pole asked tensely. "You won't even last one."

"Shut up."

"You think you're just up against some tough fighter?" Pole asked. "You're up against a machine! Don't ya —"

"I said shut up."

"Oh . . . you dumb —" Pole swallowed. "If I towel ya off, they'll know," he said.

"They ain't seen a B-two in years, Kelly broke in. "If anyone asks, tell 'em it's an oil leak."

"Sure," said Pole disgustedly. He bit his lips. "Steel, ya'll never get away with it."

The last part of his sentence was drowned out as, suddenly, they were among the crowd, walking down the sloping aisle toward the ring. Kelly held his knees locked and walked a little stiffly. He drew in a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. He'd have to breathe in small gasps and

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exhalations through his nose while he was in the ring. The people couldn't see his chest moving or they'd know.

The heat burdened in around him like a hanging weight. It was like walking along the sloping floor of an ocean of heat and sound. He heard voices drifting past him as he moved.

"Ya'll take 'im home in a box!"

"Well, if it ain't *Rattlin'* Maxo!"

And the inevitable, "*Scrap iron!*"

Kelly swallowed dryly, feeling a tight drawing sensation in his loins. Thirsty, he thought. The momentary vision of the bar across from the Kansas City train station crossed his mind. The dim-lit booth, the cool fan breeze on the back of his neck, the icy, sweat-beaded bottle chilling his palm. He swallowed again. He hadn't allowed himself one drink in the last hour. The less he drank the less he'd sweat, he knew.

"Watch it."

He felt Pole's hand slide in through the opening in the back of the covering, felt the mechanic's hand grab his arm and check him.

"Ring steps," Pole said out of a corner of his mouth.

Kelly edged his right foot forward until the shoe tip touched the riser of the bottom step. Then he lifted his foot to the step and started up.

At the top, Pole's fingers tightened around his arm again.

"Ropes," Pole said, guardedly.

It was hard getting through the ropes with the covering on. Kelly almost fell and hoots and catcalls came at him like spears out of the din. Kelly felt the canvas give slightly under his feet and then Pole pushed the stool against the back of his legs and he sat down a little too jerkily.

"Hey, get that derrick out o' here!" shouted a man in the second row. Laughter and hoots. "Scrap iron!" yelled some people.

Then Pole drew off the covering and put it down on the ring apron.

Kelly sat there staring at the Maynard Flash.

The B-seven was motionless, its gloved hands hanging across its legs. There was imitation blonde hair, crew cut, growing out of its skull pores. Its face was that of an impassive Adonis. The simulation of muscle curve on its body and limbs was almost perfect. For a moment Kelly almost thought that years had been peeled away and he was in the business again, facing a young contender. He swallowed carefully. Pole crouched beside him, pretending to fiddle with an arm plate.

"Steel, *don't*," he muttered again.

Kelly didn't answer. He felt a desperate desire to suck in a lungful of air and bellow his chest. He drew in small patches of air through his nose and let them trickle out. He kept staring at the Maynard Flash, thinking of the array of instant-reaction centers inside that smooth arch of chest. The drawing sensation reached his stomach. It was like a cold hand pulling in at strands of muscle and ligament.

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A red-faced man in a white suit climbed into the ring and reached up for the microphone which was swinging down to him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "the opening bout of the evening. A ten-round light heavyweight bout. From Philadelphia, the B-two, *Battling Maxo*."

The crowd booed and hissed. They threw up paper airplanes and shouted "*Scrap iron!*"

"His opponent, our own B-seven, the *Maynard Flash!*"

Cheers and wild clapping. The Flash's mechanic touched a button under the left armpit and the B-seven jumped up and held his arms over his head in the victory gesture. The crowd laughed happily.

"*Jesus*," Pole muttered, "I never saw that. Must be a new gimmick."

Kelly blinked to relieve his eyes.

"Three more bouts to follow," said the red-faced man and then the microphone drew up and he left the ring. There was no referee. B-fighters never clinched — their machinery rejected it — and there was no knock-down count. A felled B-fighter stayed down. The new B-nine, it was claimed by the Mawling publicity staff, would be able to get up, which would make for livelier and longer bouts.

Pole pretended to check over Kelly.

"Steel, it's your last chance," he begged.

"*Get out*," said Kelly without moving his lips.

Pole looked at Kelly's immobile eyes a moment, then sucked in a ragged breath and straightened up.

"Stay *away* from him," he warned as he started through the ropes.

Across the ring, the Flash was standing in its corner, hitting its gloves together as if it were a real young fighter anxious to get the fight started. Kelly stood up and Pole drew the stool away. Kelly stood watching the B-seven, seeing how its eye centers were zeroing in on him. There was a cold sinking in his stomach.

The bell rang.

The B-seven moved out smoothly from its corner with a mechanical glide, its arms raised in the traditional way, gloved hands wavering in tiny circles in front of it. It moved quickly toward Kelly who edged out of his corner automatically, his mind feeling, abruptly, frozen. He felt his own hands rise as if someone else had lifted them and his legs were like dead wood under him. He kept his gaze on the bright unmoving eyes of the Maynard Flash.

They came together. The B-seven's left flicked out and Kelly blocked it, feeling the rock-hard fist of the Flash even through his glove. The first moved out again. Kelly drew back his head and felt a warm breeze across his mouth. His own left shot out and banged against the Flash's nose. It was like hitting a door knob. Pain flared in Kelly's arm and his jaw muscles

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went hard as he struggled to keep his face blank.

The B-seven feinted with a left and Kelly knocked it aside. He couldn't stop the right that blurred in after it and grazed his left temple. He jerked his head away and the B-seven threw a left that hit him over the ear. Kelly lurched back, throwing out a left that the B-seven brushed aside. Kelly caught his footing and hit the Flash's jaw solidly with a right uppercut. He felt a jolt of pain run up his arm. The Flash's head didn't budge. He shot out a left that hit Kelly on the right shoulder.

Kelly back-pedaled instinctively. Then he heard someone yell, "Get 'im a bicycle!" and he remembered what Mr. Waddow had said. He moved in again, his lips aching they were pressed together so tightly.

A left caught him under the heart and he felt the impact shudder through his frame. Pain stabbed at his heart. He threw a spasmodic left which banged against the B-seven's nose again. There was only pain. Kelly stepped back and staggered as a hard right caught him high on the chest. He started to move back. The B-seven hit him on the chest again. Kelly lost his balance and stepped back quickly to catch equilibrium. The crowd booed. The B-seven moved in without making a single mechanical sound.

Kelly regained his balance and stopped. He threw a hard right that missed. The momentum of his blow threw him off center and the Flash's left drove hard against his upper right arm. The arm went numb. Even as Kelly was sucking in a teeth-clenched gasp the B-seven shot in a hard right under his guard that slammed into Kelly's spongy stomach. Kelly felt the breath go out of him. His right slapped ineffectively across the Flash's right cheek. The Flash's eyes glinted.

As the B-seven moved in again, Kelly side-stepped and, for a moment, the radial eye centers lost him. Kelly moved out of range dizzily, pulling air in through his nostrils.

"Get that heap out o' there!" some man screamed.

"Scrap iron, scrap iron!"

Breath shook in Kelly's throat. He swallowed quickly and started forward just as the Flash picked him up again. Taking a chance, he sucked in breath through his mouth hoping that his movement would keep the people from seeing. Then he was up to the B-seven. He stepped in close, hoping to out-time electrical impulse, and threw a hard right at the Flash's body.

The B-seven's left shot up and Kelly's blow was deflected by the iron wrist. Kelly's left was thrown off too and then the Flash's left shot in and drove the breath out of Kelly again. Kelly's left barely hit the Flash's rock-hard chest. He staggered back, the B-seven following. He kept jabbing but the B-seven kept deflecting the blows and coun-

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terjabbing with almost the same piston-like motion. Kelly's head kept snapping back. He fell back more and saw the right coming straight at him. He couldn't stop it.

The blow drove in like a steel battering-ram. Spears of pain shot behind Kelly's eyes and through his head. A black cloud seemed to flood across the ring. His muffled cry was drowned out by the screaming crowd as he toppled back, his nose and mouth trickling bright blood that looked as good as the dye they used in the B-fighters.

The rope checked his fall, pressing in rough and hard against his back. He swayed there, right arm hanging limp, left arm raised defensively. He blinked his eyes instinctively, trying to focus them. I'm a robot, he thought, a robot.

The Flash stepped in and drove a violent right into Kelly's chest, a left to his stomach. Kelly doubled over, gagging. A right slammed off his skull like a hammer blow, driving him back against the ropes again. The crowd screamed.

Kelly saw the blurred outline of the Maynard Flash. He felt another blow smash into his chest like a club. With a sob he threw a wild left that the B-seven brushed off. Another sharp blow landed on Kelly's shoulder. He lifted his right and managed to deflect the worst of a left thrown at his jaw. Another right concaved his stomach. He doubled over. A hammering right drove him back on the ropes. He felt hot salty blood in his mouth and the roar of the crowd seemed to swallow him. Stay up! — he screamed at himself. Stay up goddam you! The ring wavered before him like dark water.

With a desperate surge of energy, he threw a right as hard as he could at the tall beautiful figure in front of him. Something cracked in his wrist and hand and a wave of searing pain shot up his arm. His throat-locked cry went unheard. His arm fell, his left went down and the crowd shrieked and howled for the Flash to finish it.

There was only inches between them now. The B-seven rained in blows that didn't miss. Kelly lurched and staggered under the impact of them. His head snapped from side to side. Blood ran across his face in scarlet ribbons. His arm hung like a dead branch at his side. He kept getting slammed back against the ropes, bouncing forward and getting slammed back again. He couldn't see any more. He could only hear the screaming of the crowd and the endless swishing and thudding of the B-seven's gloves. Stay up, he thought. I have to stay up. He drew in his head and hunched his shoulders to protect himself.

He was like that seven seconds before the bell when a clubbing right on the side of his head sent him crashing to the canvas.

He lay there gasping for breath. Suddenly, he started to get up, then, equally as suddenly, realized that he couldn't. He fell forward

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again and lay on his stomach on the warm canvas, his head throbbing with pain. He could hear the booing and hissing of the dissatisfied crowd.

When Pole finally managed to get him up and slip the cover over his head the crowd was jeering so loudly that Kelly couldn't hear Pole's voice. He felt the mechanic's big hand inside the covering, guiding him, but he fell down climbing through the ropes and almost fell again on the steps. His legs were like rubber tubes. Stay up. His brain still murmured the words.

In the ready room he collapsed. Pole tried to get him up on the bench but he couldn't. Finally, he bunched up his blue coat under Kelly's head and, kneeling, he started patting with his handkerchief at the trickles of blood.

"You dumb bastard," he kept muttering in a thin, shaking voice. "You dumb bastard."

Kelly lifted his left hand and brushed away Pole's hand.

"Go — get the — money," he gasped hoarsely.

"What?"

"The *money!*" gasped Kelly through his teeth.

"But —"

"*Now!*" Kelly's voice was barely intelligible.

Pole straightened up and stood looking down at Kelly a moment. Then he turned and went out.

Kelly lay there drawing in breath and exhaling it with wheezing sounds. He couldn't move his right hand and he knew it was broken. He felt the blood trickling from his nose and mouth. His body throbbed with pain.

After a few moments he struggled up on his left elbow and turned his head, pain crackling along his neck muscles. When he saw that Maxo was all right he put his head down again. A smile twisted up one corner of his lips.

When Pole came back, Kelly lifted his head painfully. Pole came over and knelt down. He started patting at the blood again.

"Ya get it?" Kelly asked in a crusty whisper.

Pole blew out a slow breath.

"*Well?*"

Pole swallowed. "Half of it," he said.

Kelly stared up at him blankly, his mouth fallen open. His eyes didn't believe it.

"He said he wouldn't pay five C's for a one rounder."

"What d'ya mean?" Kelly's voice cracked. He tried to get up and put down his right hand. With a strangled cry he fell back, his face white. His head thrashed on the coat pillow, his eyes shut tightly.

"*No,*" he moaned, "No. No. No. No. No."

Pole was looking at his hand and wrist. "*Jesus God,*" he whispered.

Kelly's eyes opened and he stared up dizzily at the mechanic.

"He can't — he can't do that," he gasped.

Pole licked his dry lips.

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"Steel, there — ain't a thing we can do. He's got a bunch o' toughs in the office with 'im. I can't . . ." He lowered his head. "And if — you was t'go there he'd know what ya done. And — he might even take back the two and a half."

Kelly lay on his back staring up at the naked bulb without blinking. His chest labored and shuddered with breath.

"No," he murmured. "No."

He lay there for a long time without talking. Pole got some water and cleaned off his face and gave him a drink. He opened up his small suitcase and patched up Kelly's face. He put Kelly's right arm in a sling.

Fifteen minutes later Kelly spoke.

"We'll go back by bus," he said.

"What?" Pole asked.

"We'll go by bus," Kelly said slowly. "That'll only cost, oh, fifty-sixty bucks." He swallowed and shifted on his back. "That'll leave almost two C's. We can get 'im a — a new trigger spring and a — eye lens and —" He blinked his eyes and held them shut a moment as the room started fading again.

"And oil paste," he said then. "Loads of it. He'll be — good as new again."

Kelly looked up at Pole. "Then we'll be all set up," he said. "Maxo'll be in good shape again. And we can get us some decent bouts." He swallowed and breathed laboredly. "That's all he needs is a little work. New Spring, a new eye lens. That'll shape 'im up. We'll show those bastards what a B-two can do. Old Maxo'll show 'em. *Right?*"

Pole looked down at the big Irishman and sighed.

"Sure, Steel," he said.

Coming Next Month

Our June issue, on the stands around May 1, will have as its feature novelet Poul Anderson's *The Man Who Came Early*, a poignant story of the tragedy of time travel into the dim Icelandic past. To celebrate the opening of the baseball season we'll bring you William Morrison's account of the Planetary Pastime in Martian gravity and atmosphere, *Star Slugger*, plus stories by Robert Bloch, R. Bretnor and others, Charles Beaumont's quarterly survey of s.f. films, an article by Arthur C. Clarke going beyond his usual subject of interplanetary flight to analyze some interstellar problems . . . and the only fantasy by the creator of Horatio Hornblower, C. S. Forester!

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In which a frequent contributor to magazines as varied as Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *and* The Yale Review *reveals a new and unsuspected (but inevitable!) consequence of time travel.*

Machina Ex Machina

by WILLARD MARSH

LOCKING THE FINAL RATCHET INTO place, Dr. Veblen sighed in satisfaction. The Time Traveler was completed.

It was housed in a cubicle bearing an eerie resemblance to a telephone booth. Coincidentally enough, shortly after finishing his internship Dr. Veblen had stolen a telephone booth for this precise purpose. Not only did it have the required shape, but there were a number of salvageable items — magnets and things from the receiver, wire and whatnot — whose individual costs were trifling, but added up to a significant saving. Later of course, when he came into his inheritance, Dr. Veblen had sent the telephone company a check to reimburse them.

His legacy had come as a complete surprise. He had always known his grandmother to be a thrifty woman, subsisting on peanut butter sandwiches and weaving her own clothing, but he'd had no idea she would be worth close to three hundred and thirty-seven thousand dollars (after the inheritance tax). However, the windfall had enabled Dr. Veblen to give up his practice and work full time on the Traveler.

Even so, it had been a rugged go. The time and the expenses had been enormous. He had been a young man of thirty then. Now he was almost fifty, and the twenty years of labor and research had consumed his entire inheritance. But it was worth it. There in the center of the basement, as proof of his winning through, stood the Time Traveler ready for its trial run.

Dr. Veblen glanced down at the skilled surgeon's hands that had made a boy's dream of adventure come true. He had no M.D. to place behind his name. He wasn't even a doctor by the harsh definition that the state insisted on. But tree surgeons are people too, he thought in quiet pride, and we too can reach for the stars.

Upstairs, he could hear Isolde banging around as she packed her bags for the weekend. She'd been a trifle edgy for the last fifteen years or so, and this visit to her mother

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might be just the thing to bring the roses back into those good gray cheeks. Dr. Veblen thought of telling her the exciting news, then remembered that her enthusiasm for time travel was somewhat limited these days.

Presently he heard Isolde cross to the basement stairs.

"The cab is here," she called down sullenly.

"Bon voyage, angelloaf!"

"There's some cold giblets in the bread box, and your other shirt is on the line."

"Roger, snookiebird!"

He heard her sniff suspiciously. "I'll be back Tuesday, so keep your mittens clean."

Dr. Veblen waited till the front door slammed behind her. Then he did a little goatish caper in the dusk. The moment had arrived. Now for the first time he wondered where, in the infinity that awaited his choosing, it might be best to visit.

The past had no particular value. It was already accomplished and gathering dust in the historian's archives. The future, on the other hand, was unpredictable and full of hazards. Still, it might be nice to take a stroll beyond the present, just to see what it was like. Today was Friday, and he'd have to return before Isolde did.

With his imagination aflame, Dr. Veblen dropped the metal contact in the slot, waited till he heard the dial tone, then spun the selector for next Tuesday.

The booth clouded over — then disappeared. Dr. Veblen looked around, wondering where the Time Traveler had gone. Then he realized that it now existed in the past. It couldn't be here in the future with him unless he'd built a separate machine to project *it*. Mulling over this interesting complication, he surveyed the basement. There was no particular change, except that it was morning now. Humming cheerfully, he took the stairs at a trot, strolled through the empty house and stepped outside.

On the porch, Dr. Veblen savored the air of what, till a few moments ago in subjective time, would have still been next Tuesday. Then he stooped for the morning paper and ran his eyes complacently over the dateline. *Tuesday, February 14*. Valentine's Day, wasn't it? And what better way could he commemorate it than by letting Isolde know, when she got in, the magnitude of what he had accomplished with grandmother's inheritance.

Glancing through the paper over his breakfast (the giblets were a little gamy — but *good*), Dr. Veblen became aware of a persistent nagging doubt. Just because the Time Traveler hadn't accompanied him into the future still didn't quite explain the reason for its total disappearance. He began making rapid calculations on a napkin. He'd just completed them when Isolde let herself inside and dumped her bags in the hall.

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She came into the kitchen, kissed him and poured a cup of coffee.

"Have a nice weekend, dear?" she asked.

Before he could reply the phone rang. Isolde went to answer it.

Now Dr. Veblen knew the reason why the Time Traveler had vanished. It was a little staggering in its implications, but the figures were irrefutable. Newton's laws applied to *time* as well as space. For every action there was an opposite and equal reaction. Consequently last Friday, when he had shot himself four days ahead to Tuesday — the Traveler had *recoiled* and shot *itself* four days back to the preceding Monday. Therefore it wasn't there on Friday in the first place. And therefore the experiment had never happened.

"Emergency," Isolde called. "Party down the street has a eucalyptus that's a hit-and-run victim. Can you come at once?"

It was good to be back in harness again.

International Fantasy Awards

Troubles with transatlantic mail have prevented us from listing earlier the International Fantasy Awards of 1955, for books published in 1954. First place went to Edgar Pangborn's A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS (Doubleday, $2.95), second to Hal Clement's MISSION OF GRAVITY (Doubleday, $2.95; serialized in *Astounding*), and third resulted in a tie between J. T. McIntosh's ONE IN THREE HUNDRED (Doubleday, $2.95; Ace, 35c; serialized in F&SF) and Isaac Asimov's THE CAVES OF STEEL (Doubleday, $2.95; Signet, 35c; serialized in *Galaxy*). Note how evenly the sources are divided: one from each of the "Big Three" magazines, and one unserialized — but all from the same hardcover book publisher! (Doubleday similarly swept the Awards in 1952.) If you missed any of these four excellent novels, you're urged to catch up on them now.

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Mr. Porges selects a classic theme of science fiction, ever fascinating from Morgan Robertson's pioneering The Battle of the Monsters (Saturday Evening Post, *1899*) *to William Morrison's* The Inner Worlds (*F&SF, April, 1954*), *gives it a new twist, and lends it fresh conviction with his characteristic minutely detailed realism.*

Emergency Operation

by ARTHUR PORGES

THE CHIEF SURGEON MADE A CRISP, authoritative gesture, and the medical students straightened in their seats. On the TV screen of the auditorium, which covered an entire wall, he was an impressive figure: tall, bony, white-haired, and intensely alive, with time-grooved lines of character on his mobile face. The laughter and conversation died away to an expectant hush. Word had gone around of an unusual case, one that was apparently luring even the senior staff members from their swank offices. As if to emphasize that point, Hoffman and Ball, two major officials of the American College of Surgeons, were walking sedately into the amphitheater to seat themselves among the fourth year students.

The chief surgeon began to speak with the slow, precisely enunciated words of a practiced lecturer. "As you know," he said, "we are confronted today with a rare, but not unique medical problem. The patient, on his way to the operating room right now, suffered a slight abrasion of the left thumb this morning at work."

He paused for a moment, presumably to organize his thoughts, but his hesitation produced an unexpected anticlimax, and many of the younger listeners snickered, taking his remark for humor. Recognizing this reaction, the surgeon frowned.

"No, gentlemen," he said wryly, "I wasn't trying to be funny, however the statement sounded. The point is that this man, dealing with atomics — and rather carelessly, it would appear — rubbed the lesion and managed to contaminate the wound with a tiny particle — less then a ten-thousandth of a milligram, we understand — of plutonium."

There was a sudden nodding of heads among the upper-classmen.

"Normally," the surgeon went

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on, "a quick, high amputation is indicated, since such a fragment, being highly radioactive, cannot be permitted to enter the main circulatory system. That sounds radical, I know, but it's been our only recourse in the past. The deadliness of this type of isotope, with a long half-life, is almost past belief; the size of the particle is irrelevant. Literally any mass of plutonium, however small, is invariably a killer inside the body.

"In this case, however, the patient was not sufficiently alerted to the dangers of his job, and on going off shift in the afternoon, he was found to be in a dangerous condition. The plutonium had already left his extremity and lodged elsewhere, behaving," he added a little ponderously, "with the typical perverseness of such foreign bodies."

He broke off, stepping aside, so that they could see the large, complex operating table glide in, under automatic control, on its rubberized tracks. It carried the anesthetized body of a burly, middle-aged man. Over the audio system they could hear his faintly whistling breath, typical of the new drug, prontocaine. More intriguing was the rhythmic purr of a pump. A fifty gallon plastic container of whole blood lay in its metal rack above the patient, and they could see the level fall slowly as the efficient little motor helped his heart drive fresh blood through the man's circulatory system. A plastic tube led from a vein in his right arm to a sump in the tiled floor.

"Yes," the lecturer continued, as if sensing their reaction through the operating room's own smaller screen which kept him in touch with his audience, "the best we can do at the moment is to keep renewing his entire blood supply. In that way, impossible with the ordinary closed circulation, we prevent the corpuscles from being repeatedly irradiated by the plutonium. The excess, which you see being drained off, will be banked and re-processed.

"If you wonder why nothing more positive is being attempted at this time, the explanation is that the particle has lodged in a tiny blood vessel, a capillary, in intimate contact with the posterior part of the optic nerve, where it branches out in the brain.

"Now, if we had two hours, modern techniques of brain surgery would enable us, with every hope of success, to reach that area and remove the foreign body; but the operation is quite difficult, as you professors of anatomy will testify, and in that time, gentlemen, the damage to the optic nerve — it's the right one — and the contiguous brain tissue would be so extensive that blindness of one eye would surely result immediately, to be followed later, as so often happens, by sympathetic atrophy of the left optic nerve, and total loss of sight. The brain lesions would produce less predictable symptoms, but un-

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doubtedly serious ones. A very delicate situation, indeed. Our only hope, therefore, is more rapid action of a sort especially called for in this case. A geiger counter check has located the plutonium at the point I mentioned; and there being no other alternative, we have sent for a distinguished colleague who is uniquely competent to handle this emergency. It is while awaiting his arrival that I am able to give you this detailed summary of the problem."

There was an outburst of sibilant conversation. Many now guessed what was coming. It was a fortunate medical student who witnessed a case like this one. The last in this school had occurred almost six years earlier, and involved a normally inoperable glioma, one of the deadliest of brain tumors.

As one man the audience stiffened. A glittering speck, like a sunlit mote, was sailing majestically across the dustless, sterile air of the operating room. They could hear a shrill, pulsing beat as of tiny engines. The gleaming dot hovered momentarily, and then swooped down to alight on the stage of a TV microscope. On the auxiliary screen, which came to life immediately, the students saw the magnified image of a metal spheroid. A minute port flickered open, a ramp thrust out, and down this gangway came a microscopic organism. The size and approximate shape of a red blood corpuscle, it moved on dozens of whiplike cilia. Two eye-spots, immense in proportion to the creature's size, glowed symmetrically on each quadrant of the little disc. Lidless and bright, they were aglow with intelligence. A transparent sort of harness made a geometric pattern enclosing the saucer of protoplasm; its webbing held numerous complex instruments.

"Gentlemen," the chief surgeon boomed, "this is one of our newly trained colleagues from Ilkor — Dr. M'lo. He is about to enter the patient's blood stream and remove the particle of plutonium."

A technician came forward with a sparkling hypodermic syringe. They saw the hollow needle, a giant, glittering tube under the microscope, come to rest just before the Ilkerian doctor. A lipless slit at the upper center of the disc seemed to twist in a grimace of comical distaste. One could sense a feeling like that before an unwilling plunge into chilly water. The alien organism wrestled for a moment with the tough surface film at the point of the needle, and noting this difficulty, the technician drew back the plunger a trifle. M'lo was sucked through the opening, and a moment later could be seen swimming nonchalantly about in the clear tonic salt solution of the transparent syringe.

The magnified image vanished from the screen, and the audience saw the technician step alongside the patient. He gave the chief surgeon a questioning glance. "Go

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ahead, Joel," his superior ordered, and the technician expertly, in a single deft motion, found the great outer vein in the neck which drains the brain itself, and drove the plunger home.

"All we can do now is wait," the surgeon said. "There is no way Dr. M'lo can communicate with us at present. Even under ideal circumstances a very complicated electronic set-up is necessary. But while we're waiting, let me refresh your memories about our Ilkorian allies. As you may recall, it was only thirty years ago, in 1960, that the first organisms from Ilkor, a planet of Procyon, landed on earth. Luckily our worst period of nationalism was just over, and we made no serious blunders in our treatment of these altogether civilized beings. They are true seekers after knowledge, and before long they made enormously valuable contributions to many phases of our culture. A number of Ilkorians have devoted their best efforts to learning human anatomy and physiology, despite obstacles both in communication and size-differential. This has been accomplished not only through study and consultation, but actual research within the bodies of human volunteers. Being the size of red blood corpuscles and free from bacterial infestation, they make ideal on-the-spot experts in microbiology.

"A few of them — all too few, unfortunately; but they are more interested in theory than practice — have made themselves available as actual medical specialists, aiding in difficult operations. They are in great demand. Dr. M'lo, for example, is kept very busy, so that we were lucky to obtain his services today. He's the one, oddly enough, who in this very room, six years ago, entered the brain of that famous patient and destroyed, in situ, with devices of his own invention, an 'inoperable' tumor. He is an expert on radiation as well as a highly competent student of human physiology, which makes his assistance invaluable in this present emergency. By now, I hope, he is nearing the fragment of plutonium."

This was, in fact, the case. Swimming rapidly through the venous blood stream, battling its current, which while not of arterial strength was considerable, buffeted by corpuscles as bulky as himself, but less solid, Dr. M'lo knew he was getting close. The radiation detector on his webbing had its narrow bubble quivering against the stop. He paused in the rushing flood, annoyed by brittle platelets dashing against him in great numbers. He flailed his cilia vigorously, and huddled against the wall of the vessel where the blood moved more slowly. There was no light from the outside, of course, but to his ultra-sensitive eyespots every bit of living tissue gave off a faint glow. It was luminescence characteristic of life itself, although far below man's visual threshold and known to him only through the

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long-neglected researches of Gurwitch.

Just ahead, the vein branched, and it was necessary to take a reading. There was no time to retrace false steps. Every second the plutonium was bombarding the patient's tissues with missiles of tremendous energy and destructiveness. The left branch; no doubt of that. He studied the configuration carefully, drawing on his profound knowledge of human anatomy. Somewhere just a few inches away, there should be a smaller vein, and beyond it the very capillary, nestling against the optic nerve, in which the deadly fragment was wedged, stopped on its journey to the heart. M'lo, however, did not jump to conclusions. No one knew better than he how great were individual differences in the microscopic structure of humans. The major organs seldom varied in their relative locations, but capillary networks were not so obliging. Ah! Here was that last vein, all right. M'lo winced as a shower of nuclei battered his body. He could hear the crackling beat of atomic projectiles impinging on tissue; there was an aura of light ahead, painful to his eyes. He moved forward more slowly, almost with reluctance. What they didn't know, the doctors out there, was the personal agony of an operation like this one. To be sure, he was relatively immune to the worst effects of radioactivity, but the pain was hellish. The lancing electromagnetic rays were like summer sunlight on an inflamed conjunctiva; and a sharp-edged hail of nuclear rubbish, already disintegrated by its passage through tissue and water, pounded his tender body mercilessly.

Suddenly he stopped. A nuisance —a time waster, especially in this narrow capillary, where red corpuscles went single file. Just ahead loomed a white mass, a leucocyte, hurrying no doubt to the aid of the tortured cells, and suspecting somewhere in its vague intelligence a bacterial invasion. Just in advance of M'lo it had slipped through the vessel's wall, and now blocked his path. In its dim consciousness it seemed to recognize him as an alien, with no business in the blood stream. Although he was too big to engulf, it closed in, pseudopodia reaching for him. M'lo had no desire to grapple with the thing, moist, sticky and fetid. His eye-spots were cavities of pain; his whole body cringed under that terrible, relentless rain of atomic bullets. He wanted no more complications. The leucocyte was tenacious and strong, and even though it couldn't easily hurt him, it might immobilize many of his cilia, causing a delay fatal to the patient.

M'lo tried half-heartedly to escape through the cell wall, but he was less plastic than a red corpuscle, and couldn't quite make it at this point in the capillary. Well, there was no more time to waste. With a

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pair of cilia he whipped a projectile gun from his harness, pressed a stud, and under the thrust of highly compressed argon, a crystalline needle flashed through the plasma to imbed itself in the leucocyte's foamy mass. Instantly the tiny arrow dissolved; it was extremely, but locally, toxic. The white corpuscle knotted itself into an agonized blob. Then its almost invisible membrane burst, spilling loose protoplasm into the rushing fluid. A vacuole collapsed with a faint pop. But by that time, M'lo was on his way again.

The faint aura became a miniature sun; his eye-spots smarted even through the shields he fitted over them. Not too close. Even he couldn't take plutonium at short range. Nasty stuff. He made a quick, expert estimate of the damage; they'd want to know. The optic nerve was badly injured, but not hopelessly. He could see its pale surface right through the translucent capillary wall, itself a mass of lesions. There were drugs that would help those tissues mend. The brain was beyond his observation, but judging from the quantity and hardness of the radiation, there was some chance that the patient would suffer lifelong ataxia. M'lo hoped not.

He took a special grappler from his webbing, unreeling a length of metallic, flexible cord, and swimming as near the fiery, sputtering mass as he dared, sent the device gliding through the luminous fluid, almost at rest here in this far outpost of the circulatory system. It needed several tries, but finally the ingenious claws made a sort of cage about the plutonium, and M'lo pulled the cord tight. His plans were made. There was no time to drag the particle back by the circuitous route he had used in locating it. No, better to haul it away from the optic nerve immediately, and then take the direct, shortest way out.

He swam strongly, tugging at the cord, but the fragment, almost as big as he and incredibly dense, was tightly jammed. Inflammation of the capillary had closed the swollen tissue about it. With a little hiss of annoyance, M'lo snatched a wheeled instrument from his webbing, made a hasty inspection of the vein wall nearest him, and went to work. A few expert slashes with a sturdy knife, and a trio of holes gaped in the tough tissue. In a matter of moments he lashed the device — a simple block-and-tackle unit giving a mechanical advantage of four — in place, and threading the free end of the cord through, gave a savage tug.

There was the sound of ripping cells; the lacerated capillary loosed its grip, and the radioactive lump, sizzling and sparking viciously, was tumbling downstream at him. There was nothing else to do, unless he wanted that red-hot mass to bowl him over. M'lo dropped the cord and fled.

Coldly angry, reproachful of his

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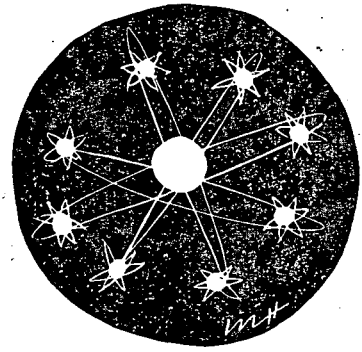
own blunder, he ducked down a side branch to let the plutonium grate past. He was worried. Suppose the damned thing stuck in a worse place? Ruefully he began to trace it. Luckily the abandoned pulley was no problem; made of titanium alloy, it would be covered by venous tissue without causing inflammation.

Good! A break at last. He found the particle firmly jammed in another capillary, a minute vessel close by. Only the plutonium's weight and irregularity had diverted it from the main stream; otherwise he might be chasing it through the lungs by now.

Better get out of here. Taking another grappler from his web, he captured the fragment again, made a quick estimate of the situation, and with scalpels in four adjacent cilia, began to slice his way to the skin. The openings he made were too small to bleed; often he managed to slip, corpuscle-like, through a slacker wall of tissue. Only his great strength and dexterity, plus the array of manipulative instruments he carried, made it possible for him to bring the plutonium along. To a man, his task would have compared with that of hauling a loaded boxcar through several miles of tropical jungle. A final slash of the keen blades, and he was out, dragging the radioactive mass after, and standing on the patient's gently heaving chest with a white fold of sterile sheet like a ghastly sky above him.

The watchers saw the technician bend over with a powerful hand microscope, catch the plutonium in a bit of lead wool, and carry it triumphantly away. Beside the almost invisible specialist, waiting wearily on the patient's body, a single tiny spot of crimson welled. It was the only blood shed in the operation.



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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THERE HAVE BEEN SO MANY RECENT volumes of non-fiction related to themes of science fiction or fantasy that it's time for a round-up here of facts, actual, conjectured and purported.

The most phenomenally successful book of fantasy-fact in a long time is Morey Bernstein's THE SEARCH FOR BRIDEY MURPHY (Doubleday, $3.75), which may well top WORLDS IN COLLISION or any of the saucer books. At this writing (in late February), it has zoomed in six weeks from 14th to 2nd on the N. Y. *Times* national bestseller list, and to an easy first in some regions — notably California, where it has become a major mania of the films-and-TV set. A condensation was serialized by *True*, which billed it as "stranger than flying saucers"; $4.95 LP records of its contents are available (via *True*); and a film version is scheduled to be released later in 1956.

Such a phenomenon merits somewhat detailed consideration. Morey Bernstein is a Colorado businessman who practices as an amateur hypnotist and hypnotherapist and who believes in reincarnation. Half of the book is merely Mr. Bernstein on the subjects of hypnosis, reincarnation and extra-sensory perception — a rehash of familiar material better and more authoritatively covered elsewhere. (And I wish that reincarnationists who smugly quote *John* 3:3 to indicate Jesus' endorsement of their creed would take the trouble to go on and read *John* 3:5.)

Whatever worth the book has must lie in the evidential value of Bernstein's claim that he led a hypnotized subject back past her birth into memories of a previous incarnation — to be precise, that he evoked from Ruth Simmons, a pseudonymous Colorado housewife, the voice and memories of Bridget Kathleen ("Bridey") MacCarthy, née Murphy, who was born in Cork in 1798 and died in Belfast in 1864.

The volume presents the complete transcript from tapes of five deep-trance sessions with Ruth-Bridey in 1952 and 1953 — a transcript which offers evidence of precisely nothing beyond the possible fact that Bernstein may have encountered an interesting but far from unique case of multiple personality.

The Bridey side of Ruth is by no means niggardly in providing detailed verifiable information — data which, if verified, might go a long

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way toward establishing Bernstein's thesis. Of the 105,000 words in this book, one minute section of 3,000 is devoted to the task of verification; and the best one can say of this is that the job was carelessly and inadequately performed.

Bridey gives the full name of her husband, states that he taught at Queen's University, Belfast, during a given period, and names several of his faculty colleagues; Mr. Bernstein says simply that "there has not yet been a search to determine" whether any of these names appear in the University's records. A dominant character in her narratives is Father John Gorman of St. Theresa's Church, Belfast; "a solicitor of an Irish legal firm employed to check this matter reported . . . 'I never received any acknowledgment of my letters to the parish priest,' " and dropped the matter there. But to check the parishional assignments of a given priest one does not go to the parish, which may or may not happen to have records of a century ago; one checks with the bishop's chancellor of the diocese concerned. So there has not been even an attempt to verify the two most easily checkable matters of public record.

Most of the verification section is devoted to trivia; and the one item which at first reading sounds convincing turns out quite the opposite: the matter of Bridey's claim to a relative with the extraordinary name of "Plazz." "On this point an Irish investigator reported: 'Plazz. This is genuine all right and throws a sense of authenticity about the whole thing. It is the very, very rare Christian name Blaize [*sic*], called after the Irish Saint Blaize.' " But St. Blaise is not an "Irish Saint," but a Fourth Century Armenian. Surely an Irishman (of all men!) knows who his national saints are; and one begins to doubt even the *bona fides* of the "Irish investigator."

If there is — at least so far as Mr. Bernstein is able to demonstrate — no internal evidence to establish Bridey's existence independent of Ruth, there is a certain amount of evidence, overlooked by Bernstein and his editors, indicating that Bridey is no more a nineteenth Century Irishwoman than I am. (And indeed less so, since I can at least claim descent from one.)

Her knowledge of Irish words is restricted to such stock items as *banshee* and *colleen* (plus one or two unverifiable coinages). She becomes hopelessly confused when asked about the pounds-shillings-pence system of money. She consistently pronounces Gaelic names like an American who has seen but never heard them (*e.g.*, *Cooch-a-lain* for *Cuchulainn* — which is pronounced, as that grand Irish narrator of the hero's exploits, W. B. Ready, prefers also to spell it, *Coo-Cullen*). She insists, at some length, that the Irish-Gaelic *lough* and the Scottish-Gaelic *loch* are pronounced differently; they are indistinguishable.

The most curious internal clue to

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the falsity of Bridey's narrative lies in the date of her death. She died, she keeps telling us, "on a Sunday." She was born on December 20, 1798, and died in 1864 at the age of 66 — all data which she keeps repeating. There are, therefore, only twelve days of 1864 on which she could have died aged 66 — December 20 to 31 inclusive. Of those twelve days, only one was a Sunday . . . and that was December 25! And I cannot find it psychologically credible that one who died on Christmas Day (and in an extremely devout Christian country) should be obsessed merely by the memory that she died "on a Sunday."

I do not wish to imply that this book is a fraud or even a hoax. I am convinced that Morey Bernstein is as sincere as he is enterprising. The book represents the triumph of an intense wish-to-believe, which can persuade its owner that he sees evidential confirmation where none exists. It is not surprising that Mr. Bernstein has deluded himself, nor that he has been able to delude thousands of hopefully credulous readers. It is, however, somewhat difficult to condone the delusions of the editors at *True* and at Doubleday, who should be more firmly grounded in the evaluation of factual data.

Bridey's avidly credulous audience probably largely overlaps that which has made flying saucer books such a profitable staple in the publishing business. But these eager saucerians will give a somewhat chill welcome to the longest and by far the best book on the subject to date: Edward J. Ruppelt's THE REPORT ON UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS (Doubleday, $4.50).

From early 1951 to late 1953, Ruppelt headed Project Blue Book, the U. S. Air Force's organization to investigate all reports of UFOs (a term, incidentally, invented by Ruppelt). Here he gives as many detailed analyses of significant sightings, both before and during his tenure, and as much information as to the USAF's internal debates and shifts on UFO policy as security regulations permit.

Ruppelt is almost completely successful in maintaining a neutral attitude which will exasperate both "pro-" and "anti-saucer" factions, in and out of the USAF. In the long run (and it *is* a long run of over 120,000 words), the balance shifts a little to the "pro" side; but the fanatic believers will be enraged not merely by his curt dismissal of all personal visitation reports, but by his plausible explanations of a number of the most celebrated UFO "classics," including even the Mantell case.

His conclusions are that the USAF is in no way trying to "hide anything" from the public; that the current USAF policy, however, is to try to write the whole subject off and pretend the UFOs will go away quietly if nobody pays any attention to them; that expert opinion,

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both among airmen and among scientists, is still sharply divided as to the nature and origin of such UFOs as remain unexplained in the USAF files; and that the theory that some may be alien spacecraft has, so far not been proved or disproved.

It's a fascinating, if overlong, book, and imperative reading — especially for followers of science fiction. It should become (until further development necessitates revaluation) the definite sourcebook on the subject . . . and for that reason I trust that the second edition will add an index and a bibliography, which such a reference work demands.

Two recent non-fiction extrapolations of the future are both interesting, yet both unsatisfactory for oddly opposite reasons.

Sir George Thomson's THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE (Cambridge, $2.50) suffers from too careful adherence to its title. The "foreseeable" future always turns out to be a timid, tame and untrue picture — *cf.* Poe's 1849 story, *Mellonta Tauta* (F&SF, December, 1955), set in the year 2848 yet hopelessly outdated early in the Twentieth Century. Similarly, I believe that Nobel Laureate Thomson's picture of the future will seem timorous and outmoded in another 50 or possibly even 25 years; but meanwhile it is intelligently and solidly grounded, if sometimes a bit muzzy in logic.

No such conservative timidity hampers Morris L. Ernst in UTOPIA 1976 (Rinehart, $3.50). Here we move ahead so rapidly that we have in two decades settled all of our problems, even to the cure of the common cold. This is, indeed, not extrapolation (it often goes flatly against observable trends), but preachment; when Ernst says "We shall," he means "You should." But such excessive and unwarranted optimism of prediction is to some extent entertaining, and perhaps a healthy counterweight to the pessimism of a Bradbury or a Kornbluth.

Two volumes deserve your attention in non-fiction of the supernatural. James Reynolds' GHOSTS IN AMERICAN HOUSES (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, $12.50) is, like earlier books of Reynolds, sumptuously designed and illustrated, and full of first-rate tales, presented not for their evidential value but simply as rattling good stories. They include such off-trail phantoms as a ghost who puts up her own theatrical posters, a midget ghost, the ghost of a lighthouse, and a ghost who makes wild grape jelly (good, too).

Henry T. F. Rhodes's THE SATANIC MASS (Citadel, $3.50) is subtitled "a sociological and criminological study," and must rank among the best scholarly, non-sensational studies of diabolism. The author's understanding of dualist theology is acute, and his research (often in untouched fields) admirable. The book is of great historic and psychological interest — and miraculously equipped with good index and bibliography.

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The late Howard Roberts created one of the greatest characters in (so his publishers assure us) science-fantasy in his tales of Cronkheit the Barbarian and the Hybolic Age; and this seems a fitting moment to review the Cronkheit bibliography. As we all know, the stories first appeared in the old Unspeakable *and other pulps of the 1930's. A few (five stories and a historical essay on the Hybolic Age) were first assembled into book form in the Roberts omnibus,* SCULL-RACE AND OTHERS *(Miskatonic, 1946). Since 1950 Pixy Press has undertaken the valuable task, in collaboration with J. Wellington Wells and other noted Hybolic scholars, of publishing the entire Cronkheit canon; and it may be useful to list these books in the order in which they should be read, their Cronkheitian chronology, rather than by dates of publication. Those published to date are:* THE COMING OF CRONKHEIT *(Pixy, 1953);* CRONKHEIT THE BARBARIAN *(Pixy, 1954);* TALES OF CRONKHEIT, *revised by J. Wellington Wells (Pixy, 1956; chronologically overlapping the first two volumes);* THE SWORD OF CRONKHEIT *(Pixy, 1952);* KING CRONKHEIT *(Pixy, 1953); and* CRONKHEIT THE CONQUEROR *(Pixy, 1950; paper reprint, Deuce, 1953). I do not understand how the following episode, surely the most revelatory of all the chronicles of Cronkheit, has been so far omitted from the collected canon.*

The Barbarian

by POUL ANDERSON

Since the Howard-de Camp system for deciphering preglacial inscriptions first appeared, much progress has been made in tracing the history, ethnology, and even daily life of the great cultures which flourished till the Pleistocene ice age wiped them out and forced man to start over. We know, for instance, that magic was practiced; that there were some highly civilized countries in what is now Central Asia, the Near East, North Africa, southern Europe, and various oceans; and that elsewhere the world was occupied by barbarians, of whom the North Europeans were the biggest, strongest, and most warlike. At least, so the scholars inform us, and being of North European ancestry they ought to know.

The following is a translation of a

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letter recently discovered in the ruins of Cyrenne. This was a provincial town of the Sarmian Empire, a great though decadent realm in the eastern Mediterranean area, whose capital, Sarmia, was at once the most beautiful and the most lustful, depraved city of its time. The Sarmians' northern neighbors were primitive horse nomads and/or Centaurs; but to the east lay the Kingdom of Chathakh, and to the south was the Herpetarchy of Serpens, ruled by a priestly caste of snake-worshippers — or possibly snakes.

The letter was obviously written in Sarmia and posted to Cyrenne. Its date is approximately 175,000 B.C.

MAXILION QUAESTOS, SUB-SUB-SUB-prefect of the Imperial Waterworks of Sarmia, to his nephew Thyaston, Chancellor of the Bureau of Thaumaturgy, Province of Cyrenne:

Greetings!

I trust this finds you in good health, and that the gods will continue to favor you. As for me, I am well, though somewhat plagued by the gout, for which I have tried [*here follows the description of a home remedy, both tedious and unprintable*]. This has not availed, however, save to exhaust my purse and myself.

You must indeed have been out of touch during your Atlantean journey, if you must write to inquire about the Barbarian affair. Now that events have settled down again, I can, I hope, give you an adequate and dispassionate account of the whole ill-starred business. By the favor of the Triplet Goddesses, holy Sarmia has survived the episode; and though we are still rather shaken, things are improving. If at times I seem to depart from the philosophic calm I have always tried to cultivate, blame it on the Barbarian. I am not the man I used to be. None of us are.

To begin, then, about three years ago the war with Chathakh had settled down to border skirmishes. Now and then a raid by one side or the other would penetrate deeply into the countries themselves, but with no decisive effect. Indeed, since these operations yielded a more or less equal amount of booty for both lands, and the slave trade grew brisk, it was good for business.

Our chief concern was the ambiguous attitude of Serpens. As you well know, the Herpetarchs have no love for us, and a major object of our diplomacy was to keep them from entering the war on the side of Chathakh. We had, of course, no hope of making them our allies. But as long as we maintained a posture of strength, it was likely that they would at least stay neutral.

Thus it stood when the Barbarian came to Sarmia.

We had heard rumors of him for a long time. An accurate description was available. He was a wandering soldier of fortune from some kingdom of swordsmen and seafarers up in the Northern forests. He had drifted south, alone, in search of adventure or perhaps only a better

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climate. Seven feet tall, and broad in proportion, he was one mass of muscle, with a mane of tawny hair and sullen blue eyes. He was adept with any weapon, but preferred a four-foot double-edged sword with which he could cleave helmet, skull, neck, and so on down at one blow. He was also said to be a drinker and lover of awesome capacity.

Having overcome the Centaurs single-handed, he tramped down through our northern provinces and one day stood at the gates of Sarmia herself. It was a curious vision — the turreted walls rearing up over the stone-paved road, the guards with helmet and shield and corselet, and the towering near-naked giant who rattled his blade before them. As their pikes slanted down to bar his way, he cried in a voice of thunder:

"I yam Cronkheit duh Barbarian, an' I wanna audience widjer queen!"

His accent was so ludicrously uneducated that the watch burst into laughter. This angered him; flushing darkly, he drew his sword and advanced stiff-legged. The guardsmen reeled back before him, and the Barbarian swaggered through.

As the captain of the watch explained it to me afterward: "There he came, and there we stood. A spear-length away, we caught the smell. Ye gods, *when* did he last bathe?"

So with people running from the streets and bazaars as he neared, Cronkheit made his way down the Avenue of Sphinxes, past the baths and the Temple of Loccar, till he reached the Imperial Palace. Its gates stood open as usual, and he looked in at the gardens and the alabaster walls beyond, and grunted. When the Golden Guardsmen approached him upwind and asked his business, he grunted again. They lifted their bows and would have made short work of him, but a slave came running to bid them desist.

You see, by the will of some malignant god, the Empress was standing on a balcony and saw him.

As is well known, our beloved Empress, Her Seductive Majesty the Illustrious Lady Larra the Voluptuous, is built like a mountain highway and is commonly believed to be an incarnation of her tutelary deity, Aphrosex, the Mink Goddess. She stood on the balcony with the wind blowing her thin transparent garments and thick black hair, and a sudden eagerness lit her proud, lovely face. This was understandable, for Cronkheit wore only a bearskin kilt.

So the slave was dispatched, to bow low before the stranger and say: "Most noble lord, the divine Empress would have private speech with you."

Cronkheit smacked his lips and strutted into the palace. The chamberlain wrung his hands when he saw those large muddy feet treading priceless rugs, but there was no help for it, and the Barbarian was led upstairs to the Imperial bedchamber.

What befell there is known to all,

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for of course in such interviews the Lady Larra posts mute slaves at convenient peepholes, to summon the guards if danger seeems to threaten; and the courtiers have quietly taught these mutes to write. Our Empress had a cold, and had furthermore been eating a garlic salad, so her aristocratically curved nose was not offended. After a few formalities, she began to pant. Slowly, then, she held out her arms and let the purple robe slide down from her creamy shoulders and across the silken thighs.

"Come," she whispered. "Come, magnificent male."

Cronkheit snorted, pawed the ground, rushed forth, and clasped her to him.

"Yowww!" cried the Empress as a rib cracked. "Leggo! Help!"

The mutes ran for the Golden Guardsmen, who entered at once. They got ropes around the Barbarian and dragged him from their poor lady. Though in considerable pain, and much shaken, she did not order his execution; she is known to be very patient with some types.

Indeed, after gulping a cup of wine to steady her, she invited Cronkheit to be her guest. After he had been conducted off to his rooms, she summoned the Duchess of Thyle, a supple, agile little minx.

"I have a task for you, my dear," she murmured. "You will fulfill it as a loyal lady in waiting."

"Yes, Your Seductive Majesty," said the Duchess, who could well guess what the task was and thought she had been waiting long enough. For a whole week, in fact. Her assignment was to take the edge off the Barbarian's impetuosity.

She greased herself so she could slip free if in peril of being crushed, and hurried to Cronkheit's suite. Her musky perfume drowned out his odor, and she slipped off her dress and crooned with half-shut eyes: "Take me, my lord!"

"Yahoo!" howled the warrior. "I yam Cronkheit duh Strong, Cronkheit duh Bold, Cronkheit what slew a mammot' single-handed an' made hisself chief o' duh Centaurs, an' dis's muh night! C'mere!"

The Duchess did, and he folded her in his mighty arms. A moment later there was another shriek. The palace attendants were treated to the sight of a naked and furious greased Duchess speeding down the jade corridor.

"Fleas he's got!" she cried, scratching as she ran.

So all in all, Cronkheit the Barbarian was no great success as a lover. Even the women in the Street of Joy used to hide when they saw him coming. They said they'd been exposed to clumsy technique before, but this was just too much.

However, his fame was so great that the Lady Larra put him in command of a brigade, infantry and cavalry, and sent him to join General Grythion on the Chathakh border. He made the march in record time and came shouting into

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the city of tents which had grown up at our main base.

Now admittedly our good General Grythion is somewhat of a dandy, who curls his beard and is henpecked by his wives. But he has always been a competent soldier, winning honors at the Academy and leading troops in battle many times before rising to the strategic-planning post. One could understand Cronkheit's incivility at their meeting. But when the general courteously declined to go forth in the van of the army, and pointed out how much more valuable he was as a coordinator behind the lines — that was no excuse for Cronkheit to knock his superior officer to the ground and call him a coward, damned of the gods. Grythion was thoroughly justified in having him put in irons, despite the casualties involved. Even as it was, the spectacle had so demoralized our troops that they lost three important engagements in the following month.

Alas! Word of this reached the Empress, and she did not order Cronkheit's head struck off. Indeed, she sent back a command that he be released and reinstated. Perhaps she still cherished wistful thoughts of civilizing him enough to be an acceptable bed partner.

Grythion swallowed his pride and apologized to the Barbarian, who accepted with an ill grace. His restored rank made it necessary to invite him to a dinner and conference in the headquarters tent.

It was a flat failure. Cronkheit stamped in and at once made sneering remarks about the elegant togas of his brother officers. He belched when he ate and couldn't distinguish the product of one vineyard from another. His conversation consisted of hour-long monologues about his own prowess. General Grythion saw morale zooming downward, and hastily called for maps and planning.

"Now, most noble sirs," he began, "we have to lay out the summer campaign. As you know, we have the Eastern Desert between us and the nearest important enemy positions. This raises difficult questions of logistics and catapult emplacement." He turned politely to the Barbarian. "Have you any suggestion, my lord?"

"Duh," said Cronkheit.

"I think," ventured Colonel Pharaon, "that if we advanced to the Chunling Oasis and dug in there, building a supply road —"

"Dat reminds me," said Cronkheit. "One time up in duh Norriki marshes, I run acrost some swampmen an' dey uses poisoned arrers —"

"I fail to see what that has to do with this problem," said General Grythion.

"Nuttin'," admitted Cronkheit cheerfully. "But don' innerup' me. Like I was sayin' —" And he was off for another dreary hour.

At the end of a conference which had gotten nowhere, the general stroked his beard and said shrewdly:

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"Lord Cronkheit, it appears your abilities are more in the tactical than the strategic field."

The Barbarian snatched for his sword.

"I mean," said Grythion quickly, "I have a task which only the boldest and strongest leader can accomplish."

Cronkheit beamed and listened closely for a change. He was to be sent out with his men to capture Chintsay. This was a fort in the mountain passes across the Eastern Desert, and a major obstacle to our advance. However, in spite of Grythion's judicious flattery, a full brigade should have been able to take it with little difficulty, for it was known to be undermanned.

Cronkheit rode off at the head of his men, tossing his sword in the air and bellowing some uncouth battle chant. Then he was not heard of for six weeks.

At the close of that time, the ragged, starving, fever-stricken remnant of his troops staggered back to the base and reported utter failure. Cronkheit, who was in excellent health himself, made some sullen excuses. But he had never imagined that men who march twenty hours a day aren't fit for battle at the end of the trip — the more so if they outrun their own supply train.

Because of the Empress's wish, General Grythion could not do the sensible thing and cashier the Barbarian. He could not even reduce him to the ranks. Instead, he used his well-known guile and invited the giant to a private dinner.

"Obviously, most valiant lord," he purred, "the fault is mine. I should have realized that a man of your type is too much for us decadent southerners. You are a lone wolf who fights best by himself."

"Duh," agreed Cronkheit, ripping a fowl apart with his fingers and wiping them on the damask tablecloth.

Grythion winced, but easily talked him into going out on a one-man guerrilla operation. When he left the next morning, the officers' corps congratulated themselves on having gotten rid of the lout forever.

In the face of subsequent criticism and demands for an investigation, I still maintain that Grythion did the only rational thing under the circumstances. Who could have known that Cronkheit the Barbarian was so primitive that rationality simply slid off his hairy skin?

The full story will never be known. But apparently, in the course of the following year, while the border war continued as usual, Cronkheit struck off into the northern uplands. There he raised a band of horse nomads as ignorant and brutal as himself. He also rounded up a herd of mammoths and drove them into Chathakh, stampeding them at the foe. By such means, he reached their very capital, and the King offered terms of surrender.

But Cronkheit would have none

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of this. Not he! His idea of warfare was to kill or enslave every last man, woman, and child of the enemy nation. Also, his irregulars were supposed to be paid in loot. Also, being too unsanitary even for the nomad girls, he felt a certain urgency.

So he stormed the capital of Chathakh and burned it to the ground. This cost him most of his own men. It also destroyed several priceless books and works of art, and any possibility of tribute to Sarmia.

Then he had the nerve to organize a triumphal procession and ride back to our own city!

This was too much even for the Empress. When he stood before her — for he was too crude for the simple courtesy of a knee-bend — she exceeded herself in describing the many kinds of fool, idiot, and all-around blockhead he was.

"Duh," said Cronkheit. "But I won duh war. Look, I won duh war, I did. I won duh war."

"Yes," hissed the Lady Larra. "You smashed an ancient and noble culture to irretrievable ruin. And did you know that one-half our peacetime trade was with Chathakh? There'll be a business depression now such as history has never seen before."

General Grythion, who had returned, added his own reproaches. "Why do you think wars are fought?" he asked bitterly. "War is an extension of diplomacy. It's the final means of making somebody else do what you want. The object is *not* to kill them all off — how can corpses obey you?"

Cronkheit growled in his throat.

"We would have negotiated a peace in which Chathakh became our ally against Serpens," went on the general. "Then we'd have been safe against all comers. But *you* — You've left a howling wilderness which we must garrison with our own troops lest the nomads take it over. Your atrocities have alienated every civilized state. You've left us alone and friendless. You've won this war by losing the next one!"

"And on top of the depression which is coming," said the Empress, "we'll have the cost of maintaining those garrisons. Taxes down and expenditures up — It may break the treasury, and then where are we?"

Cronkheit spat on the floor. "Yuh're all decadent, dat's what yuh are," he snarled. "Be good for yuh if yer empire breaks up. Yuh oughtta get dat city rabble o' yers out in duh woods an' make hunters of 'em, like me. Let 'em eat steak."

The Lady Larra stamped an exquisite gold-shod foot. "Do you think we've nothing better to do with our time than spend the whole day hunting, and sit around in some mud hovel at night licking the grease off our fingers?" she cried. "What the hell do you think civilization is for, anyway?"

Cronkheit drew his great sword so it flashed before their eyes. "I hadda nuff!" he bellowed. "I'm

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t'rough widjuh! It's time yuh was all wiped off duh face o' duh eart', an' I'm jus' duh guy t' do it!"

And now General Grythion showed the qualities which had raised him to his high post. Artfully, he quailed. "Oh, no!" he whimpered. "You're not going to — to — to fight on the side of *Serpens?*"

"I yam," said Cronkheit. "So long." The last we saw of him was a broad, indignant, flea-bitten back, headed south, and the reflection of the sun on a sword.

Since then, of course, our affairs have prospered and Serpens is now frantically suing for peace. But we intend to prosecute the war till they meet our terms. We are most assuredly not going to be ensnared by their treacherous plea and take the Barbarian back!

Through Time and Space With Ferdinand Feghoot

In 2778, Ferdinand Feghoot landed on Dallas XIX, a previously unknown planet. He and his crew were immediately seized by the natives, trussed, and carried to a nearby veterinary hospital for investigation.

Lying there in the operating theater, the horrified crew saw a Dallasian nine feet high towering over their captain. He (the Dallasian) was as shaggy as a Kodiak bear. From the crown of his mushroom-shaped head grew a hand-like appendage holding a huge hypodermic full of fuming green fluids.

They started to scream out a warning. But they suddenly stopped — their captain had chuckled! They stared at him open-mouthed. He grinned back.

"No need to get scared," said Ferdinand Feghoot. "It's just a furry with a syringe on top."

GRENDEL BRIARTON

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To science fiction readers, the title AND THEN THERE WERE NONE *means a classic short novel by Eric Frank Russell; to mystery readers it means one of the most dazzling of all Agatha Christie's tours de force, which served as the basis for a Broadway hit and a film (both called* TEN LITTLE INDIANS*). Here Daniel F. Galouye takes the theme of this Christiean suspense-puzzle, moves it into the interstellar future, provides it with something new in the way of weapons and with a fresh answer, startlingly different from Christie's and just as meticulously fair, and stages one of the tensest conflicts ever set in a spaceship.*

The Pliable

by DANIEL F GALOUYE

HESITANTLY, THE PLIABLE TOOK two clumsy steps, tottered and collapsed in a grotesque heap on the metal deck.

Six men and a boy laughed.

The baby-pink, translucent mass tremulantly reshaped itself into a spheroid and rolled toward the security of the darkened companionway.

"Arms, Felton!" Marner chided, his eyes laughing beneath shaggy white brows. "You can't balance it without arms. Watch . . ."

The sphere halted and flattened like a deflating balloon. It grew two stubby legs and a pair of stiffly extended arms.

"Give it a head, skipper!" urged Steiman, the engineer.

Marner strained in concentration, fingering the creased skin of his neck as though he were rolling a cigarette.

The Pliable produced a fifth bulge, only vaguely resembling a head. There were no such refinements as nose, eyes or mouth.

Awkwardly, it rose and lumbered back to the center of the compartment, a ruddy gingerbread man. It turned to the cabin boy, fell forward on unevenly jointed knees and performed a burlesque kowtow.

Bobby laughed delightedly.

Marner relaxed, explored a pocket of his jacket for a cigarette. "The trick," he boasted, "is in the degree of concentration."

Freed, the Pliable flowed into an amorphous heap — much as a snowman would in a furnace, thought Felton, the electronicist. Then, laboriously, it began reshaping itself into

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its natural spherical form. But the metamorphosis stopped abruptly and once more it grew in height; quickly fashioned arms, legs, a bulbous head. Felton glanced around to see who was concentrating on it.

"Damned good!" commented Marner, lighting his cigarette. "Who's got it?"

Steiman shrugged, looked at Felton.

The electronicist shook his head and glanced toward Too-Char, the Vegan. But Too-Char had returned to the computer and was busy punching in course data.

The Pliable's arms became thinner, its legs longer. It sucked in its waist line, rounded its hips and developed other caricatural feminine features. Who *did* have it? Felton wondered.

"You controlling it, Nestoff?" Marner asked.

Nestoff, the astrogator, spread his hands as though to show they were empty. "Not me, captain."

Frowning, Marner pushed the issue. "B'Rada?"

The Centauran mute grunted negatively.

Bobby shook his head before the skipper's questioning gaze fell full on him. But had Felton detected the merest trace of amused guilt on the boy's face? At any rate, whoever was in control, he conceded, was doing a good job.

Misshapen, colorless lips had formed where the mouth should be. Full, rounded breasts had been added. And now, even spike heels were taking shape.

Marner ran a hand through his thin, white hair and laughed. "Well, anyway it's a good pitch. With the right diet we'll grow the things human size."

"I can see the ad patter." Steiman gesticulated with thick, hairy arms. "'Do you have a dream girl? Buy a Pliable. Concentrate. Make her come true!'"

Tentatively free of control, the Pliable became a ball once more, with the faint red spot that might have been a nucleus visible close to the surface.

Felton picked it up — so metal-hard in its natural state, yet so susceptible of being molded and motivated simply by thought. A paradox since the day they had landed for water replenishment in the uncharted system beyond the Horsehead sector. There they had discovered the myriads of colonies of Pliables and had taken this one as a specimen.

"Pitch or no pitch," Too-Char, the Vegan, was saying smugly, "this thing'll bring a fortune. We'll retail them on a thousand worlds!"

"Even a sixth interest," suggested Steiman, "will mean enough wealth to buy and sell a dozen of those worlds."

"A *seventh* interest," Felton corrected, the Pliable throbbing against his moist palm. "The kid gets his share too."

B'Rada, grunting, shook his head.

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But Marner's head turtle-necked from the fur-lined collar of his leather jacket. "Bobby's in on it if Felton says so. Felton discovered the things, didn't he?"

The cabin boy's bony face grinned thankfully.

B'Rada scowled.

"Fair enough," agreed Steiman. "But when are we going to get it all down in legal writing?"

Marner studied the star chart. "As soon as we reach Outpost 28 and stake claim."

Too-Char took the Pliable from Felton and placed it on the mess table.

He selected a knife from the utensils bin and extended it, handle forward, toward the creature.

A pudgy two-fingered hand formed, protracted and gripped the instrument. The sphere altered shape, formed a pseudohuman torso with slim, plausibly proportioned legs and jointless arms.

Then the two-foot-tall caricature whirled in erratic circles, swinging the knife between its legs and before its blank face in the initial movements of the Vegan Saber Dance.

Too-Char, interracially telepathic, was easily the most adept manipulator of the thing, Felton conceded, leaning forward to watch.

Spinning frenziedly, the Pliable missed a step near the edge and tottered. Nestoff reached out to catch it. But the blade flashed a final time as the lumpy pink hand plunged it deep into the astrogator's chest. . . .

"Of course I didn't kill him!" Too-Char insisted resentfully. The tall angular Vegan shifted in the chair, his tanned skin flushing, while the others stood accusingly around him.

The Pliable, half hidden under the computer seat, shrank farther into the shadows, as though shamefully aware of the role it had played.

"*You* gave the thing a knife," Steiman accused Too-Char.

"And," Marner added, "*you* were manipulating it."

The Vegan swore impatiently. "If I wanted to kill him, would I do it while I was obviously in control — knowing I'd be suspected right away?"

Felton faced the others thoughtfully. "What he says is logical. If he *wanted* to murder Nestoff, he'd have found a way that wouldn't attract suspicion."

"Don't you see how it happened?" Too-Char spread his arms pleadingly. "There was the Pliable falling with a knife in its hand. And there was Nestoff trying to catch it. Whoever wanted to kill him simply seized control long enough to swing the knife!"

Marner paced troublesomely. "B'Rada, get up to the astrodome and take a fix. We can't get off course over this thing."

The dumpy, florid Centauran nodded and waddled out silently.

"All right," Marner sighed, staring at the others with tense yet

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sympathetic eyes, "let's try it this way: Who had a reason to kill Nestoff?"

Felton stood silently by the view port, looking out on the frozen majesty of the galactic rim — so blue-white cold, so much like the touch of death itself. He looked down at his hands. They were blanched and unsteady.

"I don't think the killer planned to kill Nestoff particularly," he said soberly, turning. "Anyone would have qualified as the victim — you, or I. The chances were slim that the Pliable would falter where it did or that an *intended* victim would be there to get stabbed."

There was strained silence in the compartment — a silence that was hurled back, magnified, by dismal gray walls. A hush that was only amplified by the background clacking of automatic relays and the subdued whispering of machinery.

"Mister Marner —" began Bobby.

But the skipper, his face troubled in concentration, waved the youth off.

"That means he would have killed anybody — just for the hell of it!" Steiman exclaimed.

"And there's no reason to be sure he won't kill again," Too-Char added.

Felton thrust his hands in his pockets and turned back to face the awful infinity of stars and nebulae. Nestoff was somewhere out there in the terrible cold and nothingness of space — ejected like so much refuse to drift on toward the curtain of eternity. It was a ghastly thought and —

"Mister Marner."

Felton started at the sound of the youth's more anxious tone.

"But why?" the captain demanded, ignoring Bobby. "Why should he kill again? Certainly not . . . just for the hell of it."

"Of course not," Felton said grimly. "An hour ago there were seven shares in the Pliables. Now the profits go only six ways."

Steiman, the brawny tubeman, exchanged studied stares with the slim Vegan. Felton looked apprehensively into the skipper's eyes. Then the compartment was dissected by darting, interchanging glances of suspicion.

"One of us, gentlemen," said Marner apathetically, "is a murderer."

So trivially, thought Felton — as though he were a grade school teacher admonishing his class.

"Mister Marner!" Bobby blurted finally. "The Pliable's gone!"

"B'Rada!" Felton whispered coarsely, remembering the Centauran. Then he joined the race up the companionway.

They found the chunky crewman on the deck of the astrodome compartment, his face turned up to the infinite splendor of the stars. His cheeks were puffed and purple and his neck bruised and torn, as though he had been garroted with a rough rope.

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In the corner near the collator, a long thin Pliable contracted slowly into a spheroid.

Starlight was a bluish-green luminescence on Steiman's radiation-darkened face. He swore scornfully and lunged for the creature.

The same starlight reflected off Felton's features in a paler hue as he grasped the tubeman's arm. "It may still be under control!"

Steiman's shirt was alternately taut and slack over his heaving chest.

Too-Char sighed impatiently. "Just staring at the thing won't solve anything."

"I'll get it," volunteered Marner, stepping forward. But he stopped and turned back to the others. "Steiman — recite Article I of the *Handbook;* Too-Char — Article II; Felton — Article III. You, Bobby, count out loud."

Steiman mussed his hair disgustedly and swore. "A hell of a time to —"

"The idea," the Vegan explained patiently, "is to keep everybody mentally occupied so nobody can control it."

Somberly, as though leading a funeral cortege, Felton headed back for the central compartment, the profuse phrases of Article III droning from his mouth like a dirge. The words were rote — a grim veneer for thoughts mired in the vision of *two* bodies in the timeless embrace of the void.

Marner, his thin lips drawn even tighter, came next, holding the Pliable at arm's length. Behind him, Too-Char's dry words commingled with Steiman's in their mechanical recitations of Articles I and II.

"Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine . . ." Bobby's voice was loud and purposeful as the procession entered the central compartment.

Marner stooped to roll the Pliable into a smaller compartment with a single bunk. He dogged the hatch and locked it with a key.

Voices in recital sighed into silence.

"That's supposed to solve everything?" Steiman asked cynically, hitching his trousers.

"Until we can reason this thing out," explained Marner.

"I say destroy it!" the tubeman exclaimed, his fist crashing down on the table. "If one of us has any killing to do, make him do it out in the open!"

Too-Char shook his head regretfully. "It isn't easy to destroy what might prove to be the biggest fortune in the Federation."

Felton wiped his hands nervously on his trousers. The fools! Dickering with death — weighing a fortune against eternal oblivion in the horrifying sweep of the infinite.

He dropped down at the table and ran a hand across his forehead. "We've got to get rid of the thing," he said glumly. "It took only a few days for one of us to think of using it for murder. What other criminal

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uses will be found for the Pliables on a thousand worlds?"

"Dump it out the airlock!" Steiman insisted.

"Suppose we take a vote?" suggested Too-Char.

"Agreed," Marner clipped. "Steiman?"

"Kill it."

"Too-Char?"

"Keep it."

"Felton?"

"Destroy it!" He flinched as the words came out with more force than he had intended.

They all turned to stare expectantly at the captain.

"Sorry, gentlemen," Marner apologized. "But more chances have been taken for lesser fortunes. I vote to keep it."

Steiman grumbled irately and hunched over the table. "Two against two. We haven't gotten anywhere."

"But," the captain reminded, "we haven't heard from the fifth share. . . . Bobby?"

The cabin boy fretted indecisively as he straightened loose-fitting clothes that might have once belonged to various other crew members.

"I don't want to kill the Pliable," he said diffidently.

Marner spread his hands helplessly. "Anyone want to change his vote?"

There was no answer.

Felton studied the other three men and the youth. One was a killer. But who? You couldn't discount Bobby. He was sixteen and as anxious for wealth as anyone. You couldn't base your suspicions on the vote and conclude that because Bobby, Too-Char and Marner had elected to keep the animal, one of them must be the murderer. Steiman might be the guilty one, regardless of his ballot to dispose of the thing — he might have surmised that the over-all vote would favor retention.

The ship streaked motionlessly through the vast silence outside — a stillness so intense, Felton thought, that it carried the thunderous impact of a thousand blasting rockets.

Inside the central compartment, the silence was no less profound as the four men and the boy studied one another with welling suspicion.

Marner toyed with the corrugations of his neck. "Since we're stuck with the Pliable, our only alternative is to find out who the murderer is."

Steiman turned angrily toward the Vegan. "Too-Char can control it better than any of us. And I don't fall for the rot that he couldn't have killed Nestoff because his guilt would have been too obvious. Maybe that's exactly why he *did* kill him! Maybe he gambled on being able to convince us he'd be the most unlikely suspect!"

It couldn't be the Vegan, Felton was almost convinced. While the Centauran was being killed, Too-Char had been too active in the

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conversation over the first murder to be in control of the Pliable.

The Vegan rose angrily; shook a thin finger at Steiman. "I think you did it! You were too damned quiet at the time B'Rada was killed!"

The tubeman's dense frame shook with rage. "I voted to destroy the thing! Remember?" Then he lunged for the compartment where the Pliable was confined.

But Marner stopped him. "A convincing exhibition, Mister Steiman. However, it doesn't prove you're not the murderer any more than my failure to stage such a demonstration proves I am."

"How do we know you *aren't?*" Steiman returned scornfully.

"I?" Marner was taken aback.

Felton confronted the skipper. "He's right. You could be. It might have been just normal quick thinking, but you *were* prompt with the idea that we all recite something while you carried the Pliable to lock it up. It *could* have been a procedure you'd thought out well in advance — just to convince us you were as scared as the rest of us."

Marner puffed like an adder; rammed his fists against his hips. "And why would I bother to lock it up if I wanted to use it to kill the rest of you?"

Steiman volunteered the answer. "So we wouldn't destroy it and deprive you of a weapon."

"If it kills again, we'll be sure to destroy it. Then where will my weapon be?"

"Maybe," said Felton thoughtfully, "you'll be satisfied with paring the shares down to four."

But he added hastily, "Understand now — I'm not accusing you. I'm only developing a line of reasoning on the assumption that you *might* be the murderer."

The skipper turned glowering on him. "All right, Mister Felton! Now let's consider the assumption *you* are the killer. . . . You're pretty clumsy whenever you try to direct the Pliable mentally, aren't you? Can't even make it balance itself."

Felton shrugged indifferently. He'd suspected they would accuse him on this basis. "I can't help it if my control isn't as good as yours."

"Can't you, Mister Felton?" Marner shouted. "Takes concentration, doesn't it? And mental power too. You're an electronicist — the only man aboard with a degree. Or are you going to doubletalk us into believing that it also takes some sort of *subconscious* underflow to control the Pliable and that the seat of your intelligence is in your *conscious* mind? Did you want us to *believe* you couldn't manipulate that thing?"

Felton laughed humorlessly. "Put me down in Too-Char's category. Would I distinguish myself from the rest of you? Would I draw attention by pretending to be the only person who *hasn't* developed a normal degree of control?"

Bobby, seated on a corner of the mess table, gripped its edge with

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lean white hands. "I don't think Mister Felton is the one."

Steiman's laughter exploded. "Listen to the kid! Putting himself up as God Almighty!"

He stepped threateningly toward the youth. "Think you're above suspicion? Think you can sit back and watch us kick each other's teeth out without anybody ever suspecting that a skinny little cabin boy could be the one?"

Bobby cringed. "Honest, I didn't —"

The tubeman turned to the others. "Look at him! Look at the guilt on his face!"

"Leave the kid alone," Marner said, unconvinced.

"But he isn't any more immune than the rest!" Steiman protested. "Maybe any one of us wouldn't hesitate to do our killing like a man. But a kid would have to be crafty if he wanted to succeed!"

Bobby backed away, dismayed. To Felton, he seemed genuinely frightened. So the electronicist went over and stood by him.

Too-Char rubbed his face uneasily. "The kid *has* maneuvered the Pliable more than any of us. He's done nothing but play with it for the past three weeks."

Steiman squinted at the boy. "And he was damned deep in thought until he decided to announce the Pliable had left the compartment."

"Hold it!" Felton put his arm protectively around Bobby's shoulder. "Just because we can defend ourselves against suspicion, that's no reason to take it out on the kid. We won't assume he's any guiltier than you or I."

He welcomed the welling resentment he felt over unfair treatment of the youth. It seemed to ease some of the tension that had been mounting within him. The threat to the boy was something he could fight. It wasn't a slithering death that could strike without warning and leave his body to be jettisoned in unbounded nothingness.

The others relaxed before his determined stand. Chairs scraped and they seated themselves around the table.

"We're not getting anywhere," Too-Char observed sullenly.

"So what do we do?" Steiman rasped. "Sit around and recite the *Handbook* for the next two weeks?"

Too-Char looked toward the compartment where the Pliable was confined. "That shouldn't be necessary — not with the thing locked up."

"And only one person holding the key?" Bobby asked timidly. Then he shrank as Marner laced him with a resentful glance.

"The kid's right," Steiman agreed. "I don't trust Marner — or anyone."

The captain fished in his pocket for the key; tossed it on the table. Too-Char took a drinking glass from its rack and turned it upside down over the object.

"There are five of us," said

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Marner. "Three will maintain constant watch over the key while the other two do the ship's chores. If one of the three as much as touches that glass, the other two will sound general alarm."

After mulling over the plan, the others finally nodded in agreement.

Marner rose. "Felton, Too-Char and Bobby will stand the first watch. Steiman and I will tend to the ship and take a break for rest. Later, we'll relieve two of you. Periodically, one of us will stand a double watch."

The ship lurched faintly as gyros swung it around. Felton, his head drooping over the table, bolted upright, snapping his eyes open. Too-Char was staring at him, smiling — amused at his drowsiness, he wondered, or was there a guarded meaning behind the expression?

"I don't think *I* could sleep," the Vegan said suggestively, "unless I was damned sure I wouldn't be next on the Pliable's list."

Felton didn't answer; waited for the blast that would alter course. It came — a gentle force that tugged at his body, soothingly. Then the freighter resettled into relative motionlessness. Involuntarily, he closed his eyes.

"That wasn't fair," he heard Bobby say belatedly. "Mister Felton had a double watch just before Mister Nestoff was killed. He's gone without sleep almost twenty hours more than the rest of us."

But Too-Char persisted with his sniping. "Trustful, aren't you, Felton? It doesn't bother you that if you fall asleep I might slug Bobby and release the Pliable and say you did it."

Felton lurched back into wakefulness. Couldn't fall asleep . . . Couldn't . . .

The Vegan laughed.

Bobby took a Spican Sphinx Puzzle from his pocket and began manipulating the pegs and rings.

Too-Char and the kid faded elusively out of focus. Couldn't fall asleep . . . Couldn't . . .

All the vastness of the galaxy was around him like a giant, flaming pinwheel — or was it like a luminous sickle? And relentless loneliness closed in on him with smothering force.

Felton screamed and the desperate thunder of his voice boomed immediately back in his ears. He jerked his head around frantically and his temple struck the padded lining of his helmet.

Forcing calmness in his actions, he thrashed his weightless arms about in the black nothingness and began rotating. Slowly, the ship with its lighted portholes and gaping airlock swung into view . . . a hundred yards away.

He reached for the lifeline to pull himself back.

BUT THERE WAS NO LIFELINE!

He screamed again, clawing useless handfuls of vacuum as though he could get a grip on the blanket of void and drag himself back to safety.

Exhausted, he fell limp, scarcely

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resisting the flow of madness that lapped at him from the very boundlessness of the ether.

Then he saw the others — Nestoff and B'Rada close by, floating placidly with only the serenity of death on their faces; Too-Char and Steiman, halfway between him and the ship and struggling to swim through the ether as they might through water; Marner and Bobby, only feet away from the open hatch.

Frenziedly, Felton reached out for the two corpses — for anything he could seize and hurl away from him and thereby gain impetus back toward the airlock. But his groping hands fell short by more than a foot.

Then he remembered his tool kit and unsnapped it from his waist; flung it back over his shoulders.

Recoiling from the thrust, he floated ever so slowly toward Nestoff and B'Rada. Triumphantly, he seized their ankles and pulled them down past him, planting his boots on their shoulders and kicking off as they slid by.

Felton recoiled faster this time. But he had *to go even faster! For the ship was beginning to move, with a faint spray of nuclear energy flicking from its tubes. Soon the veil of fire would erupt in a gusher of fierce flame that would leave not even charred remains of the seven bodies in its wake.*

He reached Steiman and grabbed the tubeman's thrashing leg; hurled him back toward the two corpses who had already contributed to his impetus. Reaction increased his velocity and he caught the struggling Too-Char by his wrist and whipped him back in the direction of the others.

Marner's face strained imploringly through his helmet as the skipper reached out desperately for him. Felton eluded his grasp, however, and planted the sole of his boot on Marner's back, shoving off once more.

Now Bobby swept toward him, terror leaping like fire from the kid's eyes. Felton seized him by a heel and twisted him around so there would be no danger of ensnarement in the boy's grip. Grasping Bobby's shoulders, he shoved himself away — away from the frightening depths of infinity and toward the airlock.

Already the ship's main tubes were starting to vomit flame.

Too-Char was shaking him roughly by the shoulder. "Stay awake, Felton!"

He looked up sleepily.

"I think you'd better stay awake, Mister Felton," Bobby advised. "The skipper says we have to keep a taut watch for maximum security."

Felton listened to the subdued whirring of the chronometer on the tomb-gray bulkhead; shook his head vigorously and managed to clear it. Too-Char and the boy swam back into focus.

The Vegan drummed his fingers on the table. "If you were the murderer, Felton, how would you expect to get away with six killings?"

Was Too-Char trying to trick him into saying something that would betray a presupposed guilt?

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"And how could a single person," the other went on, "expect to handle a ship?"

"I suppose he'd plan to abandon it," Felton answered cautiously. "You need a crew on blastoff and landing. But in space one man can handle it by himself. . . . He'd probably take it to an inhabited system, escape in a lifecraft and leave the freighter to dive into the sun."

Too-Char rose and paced reflectively. "Then he'd land and file claim for sole rights to the Pliables?"

"Something like that. He'd be safe enough in hiding the murders. Central keeps no records on this tub, since Marner operates unregistered."

"And from the viewpoint of the murderer, the killings would be considered necessary?"

"If he wanted a virtual one-man monopoly."

"You say *anybody* could handle the ship well enough to get back to an inhabited system?"

"Under the penalty of attracting suspicion, I'll admit *I* could."

Too-Char smiled. "Fair enough. I'll attract suspicion to that extent too. But what about the rest? What about Bobby?"

The cabin boy put down the puzzle. "Since we're all being honest, I'll have to say I think I could run the ship — and a lifecraft too."

Too-Char shrugged. "Which doesn't narrow down the field at all. Everybody's still a suspect."

"I don't know how we could eliminate anybody," Felton admitted hopelessly.

Too-Char resumed the annoying thumping of his fingers.

Bobby returned to the puzzle.

Felton rose and wandered abstractedly over to the view port — glanced out on the cold, black, endless night. A tremor ran across his shoulders and he turned his back on the boundless tomb of empty space.

Then, abruptly, he leaned stiff-armed on the table.

"Suppose the Pliable is . . . intelligent?"

Too-Char and Bobby looked up thoughtfully.

"But that's impossible," the Vegan objected. "It's never given any indication —"

"But we don't know! Isn't it possible that by being controlled so much, it might have absorbed some degree of intelligence?"

Too-Char shook his head dourly. "You're assuming too much. We've studied its capacity for learning, haven't we — food obstacle tests and all?"

Bobby disagreed too. "How would it know a knife could kill? And how would it know the heart is the most vulnerable spot?"

Grudgingly, Felton conceded the point — even with conviction as he realized the thing had negotiated the devious route to the astrodome when it had never been there before.

Too-Char rose. "Since our instructions are to select a random

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time to feed the Pliable, I suggest we get it over with now."

Bobby nodded in agreement and Felton started reciting Article III while he went to the bin to get native kernels for the creature. The cabin boy began counting and Too-Char started on Article II. The procedure was a plausible safeguard, Felton reflected. And random selection of the time assured that the two who were elsewhere in the ship would not know when the Pliable might be presented with an opportunity for controlled escape.

The Vegan got the key from under the glass and, abreast, they went over to the hatch and unlocked it.

Felton tossed the kernels on the deck, still reciting.

But Bobby's voice cracked on "thirty-four."

"It's gone!" he cried, kneeling to look under the bunk of the otherwise vacant compartment.

Felton bolted inside, his eyes frantically scanning the room. But there was no trace of the Pliable.

Too-Char stood looking dismayed at the grill in the bulkhead near the deck.

"The air duct!" he exclaimed.

Down the passageway and into the control compartment they ran. Marner, making entries in his log, dropped the pencil and looked up, startled.

Satisfied that the skipper was safe, Felton and Too-Char turned and raced aft.

Bobby went with them, calling over his shoulder, "The Pliable, Mister Marner! It got loose — through the air duct!"

In the tube maintenance compartment, Steiman lay on the deck, his body twisted half under the control panel. His skull was grotesquely misshapen and his jaw hanging oddly out of line. His face bore the bruises and lacerations of a dozen savage blows.

Felton knelt beside him then, sickening, looked away.

Marner stumbled onto the scene, his eyes widening with a sudden irrational fear. "God! He's been beaten to death!"

Alternating expressions of terror and hateful determination marched across the skipper's face. Then his hand darted under his jacket and reappeared, wielding a gun.

"Who is it?" he shouted vehemently, the weapon trembling in his hand. "Tell me, damn it! Or I'll kill all of you!"

Felton and Too-Char looked helplessly at each other; gave way before the gun. Bobby moved closer to them.

But slowly, fright drained from Marner's face and his arm inclined under the weight of the weapon as he sidled to the bulkhead. He fumbled with the lid of the refuse disposal lock; got it open. Then swiftly, he tossed the gun in and slammed the lid, punching at the ejector stud.

Relieved, Felton briefly welcomed a mental picture of the weapon

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hurtling through space at a tangent to the ship's course.

Marner's shoulders sagged in the confines of his heavy jacket and he walked despondently back to the central compartment, the others following silently. He dropped into a chair, dazed.

"Why didn't you shoot?" the Vegan asked.

Marner mumbled incoherently and lowered his face into his hands.

Too-Char leaned limply against the table. "If *I* had a gun, I think I would kill the rest of you." It was a simple statement of conviction.

Marner looked up, suddenly eager. "At least I proved I'm not the killer!"

Too-Char and Felton stared questioningly at him.

"Don't you see?" He stiffened resentfully at their dubiousness. "I had the gun all along. If I'd wanted to kill you, I could have caught all of you off guard — in this compartment — during mess."

The Vegan smiled dryly. "You wouldn't be the first sadist who passed up the opportunity of mass killing for something more satisfying. Anyway, you could have been afraid we *might* overpower you, despite the gun."

The skipper lunged up, shocked. "But — but I had the gun! I threw it away!"

The Vegan laughed contemptuously. "So now we are all supposed to look on you as a harmless, white-haired old man . . . *like hell!*"

Felton stepped between the two. "The important thing is that we don't have a weapon which might have proved indispensable."

"How's that?" Too-Char asked.

"We all agree the Pliable must be destroyed. But it might not be so easy to kill when we find it. It's almost as hard as this deck when it's in spheroid form."

"Harder," said Bobby. "When I found out I couldn't hurt it, I tried hitting it with a wrench. But it just gets soft enough to absorb the blow."

"We could *think* it into another shape," suggested Marner.

"I tried that," the cabin boy disclosed. "But the wrench still didn't hurt it."

Felton dropped into a chair. . . . Three men and a boy — all sincerely discussing a mortal threat. But to one of them, the conversation was a sham. One was acting — but who? And could they find out in time? Like Too-Char, he wished dismally that he had had the weapon instead of Marner.

Felton slapped his knees and rose. "Since we agree the Pliable must be disposed of, let's start hunting for it. At least, we can dump it out the airlock — like Steiman suggested."

The Vegan shook his head dourly. "How are we going to find the thing? It can be deformed into a thousand shapes. It can fit into any one of a thousand hiding places."

"Chances are," Marner observed,

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"that it's well hidden in one of the air ducts. To get it out, we'd have to practically tear the ship apart."

But Felton smiled confidently. "Why not *think* it out? Three of us can force it to leave its hiding place — even if the fourth *is* concentrating on keeping it there."

Too-Char sneered. "I take it you're trying to demonstrate your innocence by being naive?"

"Why can't we will it into the open?"

"Simply because the Pliable is not intelligent. You can't put it in a maze and order it to find its way out. You must constantly monitor its actions so as to provide a basis for subsequent directives."

"In other words," Marner asked, "if it's in a maze, we can't direct it out unless we can see the entire layout of corridors and check its responses to our orders at the same time?"

Too-Char nodded. "It would wind up against a dead end and you'd never know it wasn't still moving along toward the exit."

Either there was something wrong in the reasoning, Felton suspected, or, if it were correct, it threw light on another incongruity. But what?

Suddenly he had it.

"How is the *murderer* controlling it," he demanded, "when the thing *isn't in sight*?"

The others exchanged uncertain glances. Or did Felton detect the merest evidence of disappointment in the expression of Marner?

"I don't know," admitted the skipper.

Too-Char shrugged in confusion.

"I didn't think of that," said Bobby.

"I can make a stab at the answer," Felton offered. "Suppose the red spot we thought might be a nucleus is actually a photo-sensitive organ? Suppose there is a certain degree of *empathy* existing between the controller and the Pliable?"

"Then the manipulator," Marner exclaimed, "would be able to *see* with the Pliable's red spot!"

Felton closed his eyes, imagining there was a receptive visual connection between himself and the creature. Immediately, there was the faint image of metal bracework against shadowy bulkheads!

"Can you see anything?" Marner asked excitedly.

"It's in one of the cargo compartments!" Felton declared.

But the visual impression disappeared and he opened his eyes disappointedly.

"What happened?" the captain demanded.

"The spot closed. A lid of some sort, I suppose."

"Open it."

Felton imagined the eye opening. But the impression did not return. "I can't."

Too-Char, Marner and Bobby closed their eyes in concentration. But eventually they gave up the effort too.

"One of us," the Vegan said

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grimly, "was strong enough to keep the lid closed, despite the others — until he could move it to a dark place. We wouldn't have a chance of finding it now, without dismantling the ventilation system."

"But the killer knows where it is!" Bobby glanced fearfully at the others. "He'll know how to get it out!"

"More important," added Felton, "is the fact that he didn't act any different from the rest of us . . . that he was able to control the thing while talking with us."

Marner spread his arms deplorably. "And still we don't know who *he* is."

They ate a minimum meal; sat listlessly around the table for several hours, and ate another. Then Felton, dull-eyed and weary, leaned against the bulkhead, his head nodding.

Too-Char broke out a decanter filled the room with Vegan *chirarl* distillate fumes as he uncorked it. He took several long draughts.

Marner, sifting trembling fingers through his hair in an automatic motion, offered no objections.

Bobby sat at the table, his back to the others. From the slight spasmodic motion of his shoulders, however, Felton could tell he was sobbing silently but shamefully trying to conceal his reaction.

Three persons in the compartment with him, Felton thought. One of them a murderer, probably even now polishing over his plans while he hid behind a mask of pretended terror and helplessness . . . But which one?

Which one? he shouted silently to himself. Then, wincing, he looked around to see whether they were aware of his desperate thoughts. . . . But they must be — even if only because they were being tortured by the identical fears and knew that he was experiencing their same anxieties. All but one of them, at least.

Felton emitted a shuddering sigh and lowered his head despondently. It wasn't so much that he feared death as it was that he recoiled from the horrible loneliness of the crypt of space — even if it were only his lifeless body that they would consign to infinity. . . . He had been caught out there once — without a lifeline. And he had almost gone mad in the twelve hours —

"Gentlemen," said Too-Char abruptly, swilling the liquor in his decanter, "I think we should start considering the inevitable."

The others stared interestedly at him and he took another draft.

"Eventually," he went on, "we must sleep."

Felton wondered whether he detected more than despair in the words — mockery, perhaps.

"But will any of us sleep," the Vegan asked, "when we realize we may be next? And the danger is double now, too. Sooner or later, one of us who is innocent is going to start killing in self-defense."

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"I don't believe we're ready to become hysterical animals," Marner dissented sourly.

Too-Char set the decanter on the table with a thud. "It's easy enough for *one of us* to remain rational," he said coarsely. "And I suspect it would be the one who would suggest that we not become hysterical animals!"

Marner's composure dropped. He lunged for Too-Char. But Felton caught the skipper's arms.

"Let him come!" the Vegan challenged, wielding the metal flask. "It'll be one less we'll have to guard against!"

Marner remained rigid a moment, then relaxed. "We'll solve nothing this way."

Felton, coaxing him back into the chair, wondered why he hadn't let the fight develop. It might at least have narrowed down the suspects.

Too-Char drank again, indifferently.

"It occurs to me," he said, wiping his lips, "that *one of us* will be privileged to know who the murderer is — the one who remains alive after the next two are killed. . . . Will that final revelation bring everything out in the open? Will it be a fight of wills for control of the Pliable? Will it be a contest of endurance? Or will the last murder be an honest hand-to-hand affair?"

None answered. But Felton studied the Vegan critically. Was there a suggestion of sadistic delight in his attitude?

Felton shook his head hopelessly. If only they could find the Pliable! He closed his eyes, concentrating on establishing empathy. . . . *There!* Was he conscious of seeing metal bracework, shadows, a section of a control panel? Or was he merely imagining the impression?

He started as a harsh clanging sounded throughout the ship.

Marner lurched up. "Meteor detector!"

He started toward the passageway. "Same assignments on Article recitation. Let's go!"

But Too-Char shrugged indifferently. "You're the captain. *You* go alter course. I'm staying here."

Bobby glanced past the skipper into the darkened corridor. "I'm staying too," he declared uneasily.

Felton leaned back against the bulkhead, interestedly recognizing what might be a critical development.

The clanging continued and now the wail of a siren rose beside it.

"Probable collision course!" Marner pleaded, poised hesitantly in the hatchway. "We've only got five minutes!"

"Go ahead," Too-Char said, smugly.

Both the siren and bell sounded more raucously.

The captain shifted uncertainly, then plunged into the passageway alone.

"Come on," Felton said. "We can't let him go by himself."

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But the Vegan caught his arm. "This is it! Don't you see that only the one who has nothing to fear would go out there alone? *Marner's the murderer!*"

Puzzled, Felton considered the plausibility of the Vegan's reasoning.

But Bobby came up. "I think we ought to go to the skipper, Mister Felton. What captain wouldn't try to save his ship?"

Too-Char frowned over the youth's words.

"Besides," Bobby went on, glancing obliquely at the Vegan, "maybe one of us *wanted* him to go alone."

Tubes blasted, altering course. The clanging and the wail of the siren subsided. Then the ship lurched as another tail blast set it straight on course once more.

But the bell started up again.

"Must be a swarm," Bobby observed.

There was more course-changing. Then finally silence and motionlessness that lasted for perhaps five minutes.

"Let's go get Marner," Felton insisted eventually.

"Go ahead," Too-Char smiled. "Things seem to be breaking up pretty rapidly now."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe Marner felt a compulsion to save the ship — one that was greater than his instinct for survival. But the next one who goes out there alone has no such excuse."

"Conversely," Felton returned quickly, "the one who's willing to remain here alone has no fear of the Pliable."

Too-Char frowned in sudden realization.

"Coming, Bobby?" Felton asked.

The youth stepped forward. "But we'd better hurry. We've wasted a lot of time."

The Vegan followed closely.

Marner was still alive . . . but barely. The collar of his thick jacket had apparently saved him from being strangled. Subsequently, however, he had been mauled — like Steiman.

Bobby looked up as he knelt over the captain. "The Pliable must be still out of its hiding place!"

Desperately, Felton tried to establish empathy before it could reach the safety of the ventilation system.

Too-Char closed his eyes too. "I can see! It's going into a duct!"

Finally Felton received the visual impression of thin crossbars. But, quickly, the bars came closer, enlarged, then passed to the rear of his point of vision. The perspective was swallowed in darkness.

"It's in the duct!" Bobby exclaimed. "Let's draw it back out. Maybe we can see what part of the ship it's in."

Felton concentrated on making the thing retrace its course. But nothing happened. No glare of light returned through his vicarious vision.

Marner groaned.

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Felton looked down as the captain wearily opened his eyes. Blood coursed from his mouth and he coughed convulsively.

Fractured ribs, punctured lung, the electronicist guessed. And God knew what other internal injuries. He knelt beside Marner and lifted his head.

The skipper smiled briefly. Shaped by moist, crimson lips, it was a grotesque expression.

"Didn't work," he whispered. "But I almost succeeded, didn't I?"

He coughed and his face contorted. "I came close though. I would have cleared out the ship if it hadn't been for the meteors . . . the meteors and someone with a stronger will —"

His eyes fell shut and his neck went limp. Felton let his head down gently on the deck.

They returned silently to the central compartment.

"Well," Bobby said wearily, "I guess we can get some sleep now."

But Too-Char laughed cynically. "And have your skull crushed?"

"But it's all right now, isn't it?" the youth pleaded. "The skipper said he was the one doing all the killings!"

"That's right." The Vegan took another drink from the decanter. "Marner killed Nestoff, B'Rada and Steiman — by his own admission."

Bobby stiffened.

Felton trembled imperceptibly as he stared suspiciously at the cabin boy, wondering whether the suggestion of sleep might not have been in the nature of a beguiling lure.

"That's right, Bobby," he said guardedly. "But *who killed Marner?*"

There was a sickly look on the youth's face.

"It was such a fine plan," Too-Char went on, "that somebody else adopted it. Somebody who was able to wrest control of the Pliable from Marner — *and use it on Marner.*"

"And now two of us know, by the third one's silence," whispered Felton, "that he intends to complete the six murders."

It wasn't real, he thought — this conversation, the entire ghastly incident. It was as though he were detached from the discussion, looking in and listening in objectively. And he wondered whether a doomed criminal might not feel the same sensation when his numb steps carried him within sight of the execution chamber. For one of them, at least, it *was* a purely impersonal experience — the one who had usurped the Pliable.

"At any rate," said the Vegan, clutching the decanter as though to demonstrate that he had a weapon, "the field of suspicion has narrowed considerably."

Felton stared at him recriminatingly. "Maybe Bobby and I are both sure the killer is either the other — *or you.*"

Without being conscious of moving, he backed away until he was against the bulkhead. He felt a faint

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twinge of the ludicrous on noticing the other two had retreated also. They were paradoxically trying to establish the widest possible separation between them without getting too far away from one another. One of them was a damned good actor!

Exhaustion was a ringing hollowness in his ears, a relentless throbbing in his temples as he cringed — waiting, fearing.

"Well, gentlemen," Too-Char said derisively, "any suggestions on what we should do now?"

Felton thought fleetingly of Marner and longingly of his gun.

Too-Char strode to the center of the room. "Felton, I'm ready to admit I don't think you're the one who killed Marner."

Bobby sidled along the wall. "Then you think it's me?" he asked incredulously.

"I think it's you," the Vegan said.

"But it's not! Don't you see it's Mister Felton? When the captain was dodging those meteors, Felton didn't say anything. He was busy with the Pliable, getting it over to the control compartment!"

"That's ridiculous," Felton objected. "None of us was saying anything then."

"You killed him!" Bobby shouted frenziedly. "You killed him!"

"Too-Char killed him," Felton accused. "Too-Char made sure that Marner went to the control compartment — alone."

The Vegan laughed hysterically. "I think Bobby did it. Bobby suspects you. And you're certain I'm one. . . . Once around the *chirarl* bush we go — then once again, merrily."

"Too-Char!" Felton shouted.

The Vegan's face became sober again.

"If I present a plan," Felton asked, "will you help with it?"

"How do I know it won't be a trick?"

"Judge it and decide." It was a desperate plan, Felton realized. It might even backfire and facilitate the next murder. But it seemed like their only hope.

"I'll listen," the Vegan agreed.

"We know that whoever is controlling the Pliable now has an even greater power over it than Marner — he had to be stronger in order to capture it. So he'll be able to direct it from hiding place to hiding place while pretending to search for it."

"Get to the point," Too-Char gruffed.

"Suppose we agreed to take a total anesthetic shot, each in turn, and —"

"You're crazy! You mean you want us to knock ourselves out with dope so we can lie helpless —?"

"No. Wait." Felton held up a hand. "As long as the controller is conscious and able to direct the thing, the other two won't be able to find it. He'll just keep shifting it away from them. But if he's unconscious — and he will be eventually, if we all take turns under the

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anesthetic — then the two innocent ones will stand a chance of flushing the thing out of hiding."

"I still don't get the point —" the Vegan began.

"The gear storage compartment has no ventilation duct," Felton went on. "It can be locked from the outside with a key. By locking it, we can protect the one under anesthetic from the Pliable.

"We'll draw lots to see who takes the first half-hour shot. Then we'll lock him in the compartment, unconscious, while the other two try to find the Pliable. If the first search fails, a second person takes the shot. Eventually, the two innocent ones will be paired together and might succeed in hunting the thing down."

Too-Char squinted thoughtfully.

"Sounds all right to me," said Bobby. "I'm willing."

"It could be a plan to separate us and provide easier pickings," the Vegan grumbled.

Felton stiffened. "On the other hand," he reminded caustically, "rejection of the plan could be taken as an indication of guilt."

Too-Char shrugged. "Oh, hell — I'll try it."

They wrote their names on slips of paper and drew them from a bowl one at a time. Bobby was selected first; Felton, second. The Vegan smiled appreciatively on seeing his name come out last.

In the storage compartment, they searched through the lockers, behind crates, in the corners — until the cabin boy was satisfied the Pliable couldn't be concealed there.

Felton administered the injection and they waited, staring down at Bobby until he was completely under the effects of the anesthetic.

Back in the corridor, Felton's hand trembled slightly as he inserted the key in the slot to lock the door. . . . As he withdrew it and put it in his pocket, he turned around. Too-Char was gone.

Dismayed, the electronicist stood rigid, listening for any sound that would indicate the direction the Vegan had taken. But even now, Felton wondered, could he be sure Too-Char was the one? Had the other found concealment so he could direct the Pliable in the final killings? Or had he simply fled for protection — or perhaps to search for a weapon?

Felton thought wistfully of the gun Marner had ejected from the disposal lock. Then, spontaneously, he realized that if the captain had been the murderer at the time, he certainly wouldn't have thrown away a weapon he might later need. He would have only pretended to discard it!

Racing aft, he lunged into the tube maintenance compartment. Too-Char was there — fumbling frantically with the refuse disposal latch! The Vegan too had guessed Marner must have only gone through the motions of jettisoning the gun, only feigned pressing the stud.

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Felton hit him with a low block and sent him sprawling away from the ejector just as the lid came open.

The gun *was* in the lock.

He seized it as Too-Char regained his feet. Then he leveled it at the other.

"All right — shoot." The Vegan's attitude was one of despairing surrender.

But Felton only stared puzzledly at him.

"Or are you going to call your Pliable?" Too-Char asked bitterly.

"Quit acting!" Felton ordered. "Get the thing out in the open!"

Too-Char laughed hysterically. Even to the end, Felton realized, the Vegan was preserving the ruse — just as convincingly as Marner had.

"Shoot!" Too-Char challenged. "Shoot or call that damned thing!"

"I'm not controlling the Pliable," Felton said softly. Then he wondered why he was tolerating the farce.

Too-Char's face twitched, relaxed, tensed again.

Felton studied him critically, doubting that any man could act that well.

"Then it's *Bobby!*" the Vegan exclaimed incredulously.

"Bobby — or *you.*" Even with only two others left, he still couldn't be sure.

"It's not me, Felton! I swear it!"

So convincing! Yet, the only alternative was to believe the cabin boy was Marner's murderer. Felton sighed, incapable of a decision. He could kill Too-Char now. His finger tightened on the trigger. But the inescapable possibility that it was Bobby persisted.

"Let's start the search," he said wearily, handing the Vegan the key to the cabin boy's compartment. "You hold on to this."

Then, waving the other in front of him, he followed Too-Char down the passageway, keeping the gun leveled on his back.

But the Vegan hesitated. "Felton, you've proved it isn't you — by not killing me now. There's only the kid left. Let's get him — before he comes to!"

"But *you* haven't proved it isn't *you.*"

They searched four compartments. They beat on air ducts, Felton desperately hoping that with Bobby's supposed control relaxed the Pliable would either come out or make some sound to betray its location.

But their efforts were futile.

"The kid must be out of it now," Felton said finally, starting back.

"Don't give him a chance," Too-Char pleaded as they returned to the central compartment. "We know it's him! We —"

The Vegan's voice was choked off as he jolted to a stop, looking ahead at the hatch to the boy's compartment.

It was ajar.

Transfixed with terror, Felton and Too-Char stood staring hypnotically at the metal door as it

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inched shut slowly and silently . . . permitting only a glimpse of a baby-pink mass beyond the opening.

"*You!*" rasped Felton.

"You!" Too-Char whispered, starting toward him.

But Felton brought the gun up and the Vegan checked his advance.

"You only *pretended* to lock the door, didn't you?" Too-Char asked knowingly. "So that you could send the Pliable there later."

"I locked it, I tell you!" Felton whispered. "I —" But, irritated, he broke off the sentence. Why was he defending himself against the Vegan's spurious accusations when there was no question who the killer was?

His finger bore down on the trigger. But, instantly confused, he held off. . . . He *must* have left the door unlocked! Otherwise, how had the Pliable gotten in? Surely, even despite his exhaustion, he remembered turning the key — and hearing the lock click. But now, thinking back on it, had he *actually* heard the click? Had he *really* turned the key? He wavered under the impact of irresolution . . . until, quite suddenly, he understood.

"I see it now," he said, grinning triumphantly. "I know how you did it."

Too-Char retreated from the now steady gun.

"It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been a fool and given you the key to show I still wanted to trust you," Felton went on, still whispering. "You simply left the key in one of the compartments we searched. After we moved on, you sent the Pliable to get it, then on to Bobby's room."

"No, Felton! No!" Too-Char shouted frantically, thrusting his hand into his pocket. "Look! I still have the key!"

The shining object, trembling in the Vegan's hand, was incomprehensible and Felton could only stare.

Suddenly a desperate, inspired grin broke on Too-Char's face. "If you're not the killer — *prove it!* Lock the door with the Pliable in there. Throw away the key."

Felton foundered in waves of frustrating confusion. All the opportunities for convincing deceit were past. But still the Vegan was pretending innocence. Why? — But of course! It was simply because he, Felton, held something more formidable than the Pliable — a gun.

The smile drained from Too-Char's face and was replaced by an expression of grim helplessness. "But you *are* the killer. You —"

A faint moan sounded from the cabin boy's compartment.

"He's still alive!" Felton exclaimed incredulously.

But Too-Char only stared terrified at the door. "It's a trick! Bobby's the murderer! He's trying to get us to walk into a trap!"

The moan came again — convincingly sincere. But it was snipped off with a curious abruptness.

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Felton stepped toward the hatch; drew back; stepped forward again. Then he lunged for the door and kicked it open.

Bobby lay motionless on the floor — a limp but tenacious pink mass covering his face like a crape. In an instant, Felton saw that the boy had already quit breathing.

Terrified, he raised the gun; fired.

A pencil-thin stream of fire-like energy leaped into the compartment, missing its target by five feet.

The Pliable detached itself from the dead youth, revealing the boy's mercilessly battered face. Then it formed into a sphere.

Felton fired again . . . missed again.

Panic-stricken, he glanced down at the weapon's indicator. He had used more than half of the gun's charge.

The Pliable rolled slowly toward the hatch, gained speed.

Steadying himself with a grim determination, Felton took careful aim. The bolt of intense energy missed by more than a foot.

But that was impossible! The range had been point blank!

The Pliable reached the door and he leaped out of the way, catching a brief glimpse of Too-Char cringing against the far bulkhead of the main compartment.

Too-Char! That was it! Wasn't the Vegan controlling the thing? And, if for some reason he couldn't hit the Pliable, wouldn't killing the controller serve the same purpose?

He turned the gun on the other and pulled the trigger vengefully; held it depressed until the final charge was exhausted.

Too-Char fell to the deck, his clothes burned off the right side of his body, his flesh horribly charred and lacerated from the shredding heat.

The Pliable rolled serenely toward a ventilation outlet, elongating transversely as it went. With a brief motion much like that of a flagellum-propelled bacterium, it flicked through the grillwork.

Scarcely breathing, the Vegan lay on the deck writhing in pain.

"It's you, Felton," he rasped weakly. "It's you. Only you *don't even know it!*"

Movement attracted Felton's gaze to the ventilator grill and he looked over dazedly to see the Pliable emerging and metamorphosing into a sphere. Instinctively, he tensed, but relaxed when he remembered the thing was no longer under control.

Too-Char laughed thinly — a hysterical outburst that was all pain and terror and realization.

Confounded, Felton stared stupidly at him.

"You couldn't shoot it, Felton, because you really didn't want to." He winced; raised himself on an elbow with his eyes half closed. "You tried to lock the door to Bobby's compartment, but you couldn't. Yet you *believed* you had!"

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Numbly, Felton's thoughts mired. Was it possible he *had* only imagined he locked the door to Bobby's compartment? The impression of locking it — had that merely been in the nature of a subconscious auto-hypnosis?

Beside the grillwork, the Pliable altered shape and developed two stubby legs; came forward. Felton only stared feebly at it.

"We should have realized, even before the first murder, that the thing could be controlled subsconsciously too." The Vegan's voice was barely audible as he dropped back down on the deck. "Somebody made it take the shape of a woman. But everybody *truthfully* denied doing it."

Felton was only dully conscious of Too-Char's words as he stumbled awkwardly back toward the bulkhead.

The Pliable grew a burlesque head and a single arm that protruded like a cudgel from the center of its misshapen chest. It turned clumsily toward the Vegan.

Too-Char tried futilely to push away from the horror. "After three murders," he went on, his eyes locked on the thing, "you protected yourself by capturing it from Marner *without even knowing it!* But the pattern was already set. You could only continue killing. And now you can't stop!"

The bulkhead was cold and hard against Felton's back and his eyes were frozen on the Pliable — on *his* Pliable. His, yet not his, for he had no *conscious* control over it.

Suddenly he remembered his dream of being marooned in space and of propelling himself back toward the ship at the expense of sacrificing the others. . . . The dream had been a leak-through from his subconscious — a subtle indication of the overwhelming immensity of his terror. He should have realized then that he was morally capable of usurping the Pliable and continuing the killings so there could be no further threat to his own life.

Shifting most of its bulk into the club-like arm, the Pliable reared over Too-Char. The single appendage hardened visibly; dulled in color as its surface congealed to steel-hardness.

The arm struck out once — twice.

The Vegan's life went out with a grunt.

Now the Pliable turned steadily toward Felton.

It was hard enough to repress the desires, passions, malignancies of a conscious mind.

But how could you turn off the guilt complex of a subconscious?

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F&SF has the honor to present Ray Bradbury's newest story — and one of his most distinguished.

Icarus Montgolfier Wright

by RAY BRADBURY

HE LAY ON HIS BED AND THE WIND blew through the window over his ears and over his half-opened mouth so it whispered to him in his dream. It was like the wind of time hollowing the Delphic caves to say what must be said of yesterday, today, tomorrow. Sometimes one voice gave a shout far off away, sometimes two, a dozen, an entire race of men cried out through his mouth, but their words were always the same:

"Look, look, we've done it!"

For suddenly he, they, one or many, were flung in the dream, and flew. The air spread in a soft warm sea where he swam, disbelieving.

"Look! Look! It's done!"

But he didn't ask the world to watch, he was only shocking his senses wide to see, taste, smell, touch the air, the wind, the rising moon. He swam alone in the sky. The heavy earth was gone.

But wait, he thought, wait now!

Tonight — what night is this?

The night before, of course. The night before the first flight of a rocket to the Moon. Beyond this room on the baked desert floor one hundred yards away the rocket waits for me.

Well, does it now? Is there *really* a rocket?

Hold on! he thought, and twisted, turned, sweating, eyes tight, to the wall, the fierce whisper in his teeth. Be certain-sure! You, now, who *are* you?

Me? he thought. *My* name?

Jedediah Prentiss, born 1938, college graduate 1959, licensed rocket pilot, 1965. Jedediah Prentiss . . . Jedediah Prentiss . . .

The wind whipped his name away! He grabbed for it, yelling!

Then, gone quiet, he waited for the wind to bring his name back. He waited a long while, and there was only silence, and then after a thousand heartbeats, he felt motion.

The sky opened out like a soft blue flower. The Aegean Sea stirred soft white fans through a distant wine-colored surf.

In the wash of the waves on the shore, he heard his name.

Icarus.

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And again in a breathing whisper.

Icarus.

Someone shook his arm and it was his father saying his name and shaking away the night. And he himself lay small, half-turned to the window and the shore below and the deep sky, feeling the first wind of morning ruffle the golden feathers bedded in amber wax lying by the side of his cot. Golden wings stirred half-alive in his father's arms, and the faint down on his own shoulders quilled trembling as he looked at these wings and beyond to the cliff.

"Father, how's the wind?"

"Enough for me, but never enough for you . . ."

"Father, don't worry. The wings seem clumsy, now, but my bones in the feathers will make them strong, my blood in the wax will make it live!"

"My blood, my bones, too, remember; each man lends his flesh to his children, asking that they tend it well. Promise you'll not go high, Icarus. *The* sun, or *my* son, the heat of one, the fever of the other, could melt these wings. Take care!"

And they carried the splendid golden wings into the morning and heard them whisper in their arms, whisper his name or a name or some name that blew, spun, and settled like a feather on the soft air.

Montgolfier.

His hands touched fiery rope, bright linen, stitched thread gone hot as summer. His hands fed wool and straw to a breathing flame.

Montgolfier.

And his eye soared up along the swell and sway, the oceanic tug and pull, the immensely wafted silver pear still filling with the shimmering tidal airs channeled up from the blaze. Silent as a god tilted slumbering above French countryside, this delicate linen envelope, this swelling sac of oven-baked air would soon pluck itself free. Draughting upward to blue worlds of silence, his mind and his brother's mind would sail with it, muted, serene among island clouds where uncivilized lightnings slept. Into that uncharted gulf and abyss where no birdsong or shout of man could follow, the balloon would hush itself. So cast adrift, he, Montgolfier, and all men, might hear the unmeasured breathing of God and the cathedral tread of eternity.

"Ah . . ." He moved, the crowd moved, shadowed by the warm balloon. "Everything's ready, everything's right. . . ."

Right. His lips twitched in his dream. Right. Hiss, whisper, flutter, rush. Right.

From his father's hands a toy jumped to the ceiling, whirled in its own wind, suspended, while he and his brother stared to see it flicker, rustle, whistle, heard it murmuring their names.

Wright.

Whispering: wind, sky, cloud, space, wing, fly . . .

"Wilbur, Orville? Look; how's *that*?"

Ah. In his sleep, his mouth sighed.

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The toy helicopter hummed, bumped the ceiling, murmured eagle, raven, sparrow, robin, hawk; murmured eagle, raven, sparrow, robin hawk. Whispered eagle, whispered raven, and at last, fluttering to their hands with a susurrance, a wash of blowing weather from summers yet to come, with a last whir and exhalation, whispered Hawk.

Dreaming, he smiled.

He saw the clouds rush down the Aegean sky.

He felt the balloon sway drunkenly, its great bulk ready for the clear running wind.

He felt the sand hiss up the Atlantic shelves from the soft dunes that might save him if he, a fledgling bird, should fall. The framework struts hummed and chorded like a harp.

Beyond this room he felt the primed rocket glide on the desert field, its fire-wings folded, its fire-breath kept, held ready to speak for two billion men. In a moment he would wake and walk slowly out to that rocket.

And stand on the rim of the cliff.

Stand cool in the shadow of the warm balloon.

Stand whipped by tidal sands drummed over Kitty Hawk.

And sheathe his boy's wrists, arms, hands, fingers with golden wings in golden wax.

And touch for a final time the captured breath of man, the warm gasp of awe and wonder siphoned and sewn to lift their dreams.

And spark the gasoline engine.

And take his father's hand and wish him well with his own wings, flexed and ready.

Then whirl and jump.

Then cut the cords to free the great balloon.

Then rev the motor, prop the plane on air.

And crack the switch to fire the rocket fuse.

And together in a single leap, swim, rush, flail, jump, sail and glide, upturned to sun, moon, stars, they would go above Atlantic, Mediterranean; over country, wilderness, city, town; in gaseous silence, riffling feather, rattle-drum frame, in volcanic eruption, in timid, sputtering roar; in start, jar, hesitation, then steady ascension, beautifully held, wonderously transported, they would laugh and cry each his own himself. Or shout the names of others unborn or others long-dead and blown away by the wine wind or the salt wind or the silent hush of balloon wind or the wind of chemical fire. Each feeling the bright feathers stir and bud deep-buried and thrusting to burst from their riven shoulderblades. Each leaving behind the echo of their flying, a sound to encircle, recircle the earth in the winds and speak again in other years to the sons of the sons of their sons, asleep but hearing the restless midnight sky.

Up, yet further up, higher, higher! A spring tide, a summer flood, an unending river of wings!

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A bell rang softly.

No, he whispered, I'll wake in a moment. Wait. . . .

The Aegean slid away below the window, gone; the Atlantic dunes, the French countryside dissolved down to New Mexico desert. In his room near his coat stirred no plumes in golden wax. Outside no wind-sculpted pear, no trapdrum butterfly machine. Outside only a rocket, a combustible dream, waiting for the friction of his hand to set it off.

In the last moment of sleep, someone asked his name.

Quietly, he gave the answer as he had heard it during the hours from midnight on.

"Icarus Montgolfier Wright."

He repeated it slowly so the questioner could remember the order and the spelling down to the last letter.

"Icarus Montgolfier Wright.

"Born nine hundred years before Christ. Grammar school: Paris, 1783. High school: Kitty Hawk, 1903. Graduation from Earth to Moon, this day, God willing, August 1, 1965. Death and burial, with luck, on Mars, summer 1999 in the Year of our Lord."

Then he let himself drift awake.

An hour later, crossing the desert tarmac, he heard someone shouting again and again and again: "Jedediah Prentiss . . . !"

And if no one was there or if someone was there behind him, he could not tell. And whether it was one voice or many voices young or old, near or very far away, calling and shouting to him, he could not tell either. He did not turn to see.

For the wind was slowly rising and he let it take hold and blow him all the rest of the way across the desert to the rocket that stood waiting there.

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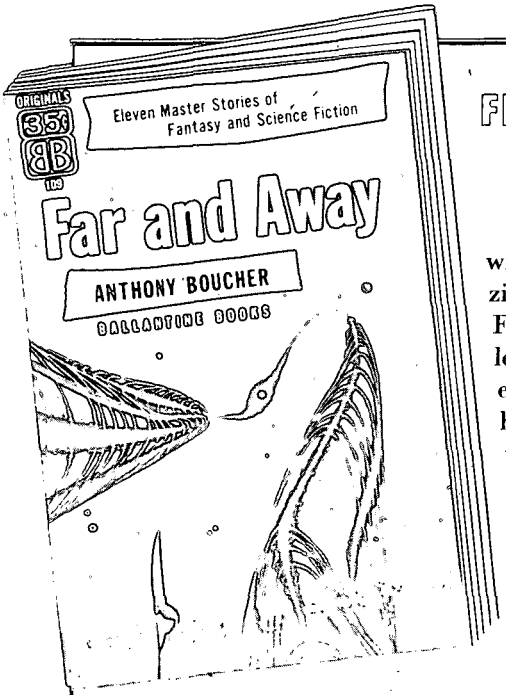

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